An Ecology of Shadows

by
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Living on the
Dragon's Spine

Death isn't death you know.

No matter how close you come difference between standing on the borderland and crossing is an infinity. And I stood on that borderland for a very long time.

I'd imagine myself on a moor with a sunless sun overhead, and sometimes I howled.

But I never cried.

She remained my talisman in that place. Sometimes I wondered if I was real anymore but never questioned if she was. And if she was real and I remembered her meant I was real too.

Time didn't exist here

I suppose, for the dead time doesn't need to exist.

Time is what we use to show change and the dead don't change.

I thought about hell and heaven sometimes. Was this either place? Was heaven and hell just the lies we tell ourselves? Even if they were not real wouldn't that have made us change our lives in any significant ways?

A sound.

I distinctly remember the sound in that borderland. I remember it the way you remember glass being born, boiling, and cooling.

I walked to where I thought the sound was.

Wasn't there.

Of course, the borderland was infinite and finite, I always walking in a circle, never going anywhere.

Don't know when I saw her.

It's not like memories work the same way there as here.

She crouched into my awareness way a nightmare does.

There was nothing save tall grass colour of blood and the sunless sun and the nothing sky then a pale form emerged, cloven

hooves, hands like talons, veiled face behind white veils, obliterating all trace of eye or smile.

Perhaps didn't have a face.

Came toward me naked and pale, her breasts, her thighs sometimes twisting to that of my talisman or that stranger I lusted in my youth, or sometimes something unhuman.

I stared longingly at her. She stared invisibly at me.

Reached out a taloned hand to me.

Instinctively I reached my hand to hers.

Touched.

Cool texture of a raven's skin thrust into my awareness and my skin I became aware.

I had skin.

I had form, eye mouth, and limb.

I was dead. No. Am dead. Even knowing, staring at her I feel behind the borderland final death about to come.

Never does.

Infinite woman taking infinite hands in infinite borderlands, embracing and being embraced. I am a cell in the body of this god.

I see my talisman then.

Know she is here too.

Looks older than last I saw her.

But her smile is still there.

And here in this place, I am her talisman.

I know it the way one knows everything without quite knowing why, dream logic a mind has, even in dying dreams . . .

THE PALE APE,
A MIDNIGHT RACE

To know someone in their entirety
is to lose all fear of them.

I. Sunset and the end of all things

We had been walking two days in the snow, boots sunk in the white mire and we had forgotten the taste of food by then.

Only three were left, the other two struggling more than I. Could see them ahead, brown packs burdening them, making them into crooked-backed insects crossing the white sea.

My pack felt like an over-ripened child trying to push me with each step further into the snow.

Behind lay the wreckage of the ship whose crew had become as driftwood washing against a shore jagged as a broken bone.

Everything was turning white.

Even death I suppose would come to me not as a black void but a white wing.

Onward we kept walking though why we could not explain.

I'd dream of course. We'd all dream though I suspect my dreams differed from theirs, though since we were no longer talking, I could never be sure.

When I slept, head lolling forward like the rotted flower bulb of a dying rose I'd dream of a great field, and there about me were large black oxen, their heads buried in the tall grass devouring a blade at a time.

I could not remember ever seeing such a thing or why I dreamed of it, only that I did, and each night after I did likewise.

All the while making our way to the centre of the frozen plateau.

Why were we walking toward it?

I could not say beyond that we were compelled by our desire to know. When life ends and there stands before you a door no one else has ever walked through before, leading to knowledge none else has witnessed and knowing none else will know you alone crossed this threshold why not step across it then? If it leads to wonder so much the greater for that last moment of a life and if it leads to tragedy, you'll find satisfaction in knowing you alone will suffer.

So, on we talked.

By the third day there appeared the mountain, though this was always the wrong term.

It seemed a mountain but was too symmetrical, too perfect, each side tapering to a point, dimensions just coarse enough to seem natural but upon closer examination was clear someone had built this. Of course, it was impossible.

Then we found the door . . .

Inside lay an endless cavern. No. Cavern implies there was some natural formation. This was a palatial hall imbued with light. Walls were transparent, allowing the sun's cold fire to enter.

We walked about silent as mourners, ever approaching the centre.

I expected not what I found.

There was a rectangular dais in the middle of the great hall elevated like the steps of a sloping ziggurat and upon it lay a young girl upon the dais, sleeping

Or dreaming.

The two men ahead slouched toward the child, themselves as oblivious to the absurdity of the situation as myself.

One of them, I forget who put a hand to the child's face . . .

I can still see the pale skin like snow, hair pooled about upon the dais, garments white as all else, small, slender limbs

resting so peacefully . . .

He put his hand to the child and collapsed. No sound. He did not scream. Did not howl. He collapsed by the body and did not move. The other man in noticing gingerly stepped about, gazing at the walls instead.

By this time what was human in us had fled. We had shape and dimension, could speak, could reason but the human empathy so highly prized was gone.

Never to return.

Even now remembering his body collapsing like a broken marionette I cannot cry. Tears will not come. I knew him aboard the ship. We played a game of jatok tor together, arranging our pieces on the board, each of us attempting to stalemate the other.

I knew him and he died and I cannot cry for him.

I followed the other man.

He gestured to writing on the walls. An alien scrawl. I could not read it but there were images as well. There were long reliefs depicting things greater than monsters.

There were rounded bodies of pustules with thousands of eyes and long tentacles and these beasts were worshipping something upon a great dais, something indescribable.

Something not a girl.

The other man, his beard frozen, his eyes wild and stark, I remember him being the first to abandon ship, watching others somersault into the water, staring at them with a cool indifference.

But, knowing I couldn't save them, I joined him upon the shore and watched the others perish save that man I played against, the last to leave the wreckage.

Something not a girl was here.

He spoke, mentioning we had no food.

He stared lustfully at the girl. Not the lust of a man seeking a girl's embrace but another lust, the lust of a clean death's certain passing.

He knew if he touched her, he would die without screaming.

I could not envy him in this.

I felt the same.

But first, we had more to explore.

There were other chambers at the far end of the great gallery. More base reliefs were showing more creatures, all worshipping that which was no girl.

But there were other images as well.

At first, I mistook them for human. You'd see the vague outline and expect to see a man, but no. A long tail could be seen extending from these arachnid forms. And among these people were great black trees and I was reminded of the black oxen in my dream without quite knowing why.

Another chamber and more people, but not my people.

Mouthless. Yes, if I had to describe these creatures I would say, though shaped like us, they had no mouths. And beyond this chamber . . .

We ventured to rooms whose silent occupants were not even remotely human or could pretend to be, creatures I thought might have existed long before the emergence of bone.

There were rooms devoted to long absent forests but trees possessed of mouths and eyes.

There were rooms whose only occupants were specks upon the walls yet the more I peered the more I could see each granular layer of those tiny monstrosities.

It would have been easier going mad than having to walk the rooms only to arrive again at the great gallery.

And her.

He made his choice by then, said nothing to me worth saying, and simply reached out and touched her arm. Again, no scream, no simpering cry . . . fell against his comrade leaving me alone.

I was alone now in a frozen silver country whose only reminder of the upper world was my soon-to-be murderer.

And another.

I do not know when I became aware of it. Perhaps it was at the beginning or perhaps the chamber where the scorpion women were. But at some point, I realized I was not alone.

Creeping behind me even now I felt the approach of something on soft, sinuous feet, like the way an octopi would cross from pool to pool, land between an alien country for it only to know of in glimpses.

I turned to see it there.

I had expected a beast but instead, there stood a man dressed in armour snow-coloured, his eyes a piercing blue.

The armour was composed of long curving shales of white and he shimmered as he moved, creating a storm of brilliance as if trying to hide something from my sight.

I did not speak to him as I saw him, for I knew he was no more human than the girl. He was a guardian of this place and his appearance was another layer to his protection of it.

If one is confronted by the unknown they will panic at once, but if confronted by the familiar, though absurd, it takes time to react.

Had he desired it he would have ended me.

He did not desire it.

He spoke, speaking a language I could not understand but the longer he spoke the sooner the words made sense.

I had come a long way, which he knew.

As had he.

He strode confidently to the girl. I following.

He gestured for me to place my hand upon her but I declined. I could not die just then, in the snow.

I had fear, a fear so deep, so primal it dwarfed my sense of self, and depressed my very being. If he had asked me to die in

fire I would have, but to die as this . . .

I would not die.

Kill me if you wish but I will not die.

I would not die, he said. This was not the end. I glanced at my two companions but he indicated they were not dead. Merely their bodies are asleep in a dreamless sleep.

Their souls resided elsewhere in the girl.

What is she? I asked.

She is the last of her kind and the first. She is the repository of the dead, the maker of the living, the mother of the serpent and the insect, the leviathan and the man.

Hunger was taking me by now. I would not last long.

The man's appearance shifted as we spoke. Great blue eyes unlike any terrestrial eye grew along his arms which I could not see through the armour yet knew they were growing there.

Mouths were forming upon his body and I heard music as we spoke, alien voices singing. It was so haunting I almost wept. *Almost.*

I turned from him and went out upon the snows, passing the threshold of the door not knowing if I would be allowed to return. But he followed me and we stood watching the last sun fall for me.

I knew it was the last either way. If I died of hunger or snow or her or him what did it matter the mechanism, only the time?

I'm ready, I said.

I returned as the gold of the sun poured behind me making the gallery shimmer.

The man towered over me into endless mutations pulsating, evaporating as the singing continued and I placed my hand finally in hers.

Beyond in fields of ice were black oxen nestling upon snows devouring the last shards of grass and I could feel them the

way a mother feels her child in pain.

But there was no pain.

I could not cry out or scream.

The black oxen became long hills sinuous as dragons and I watched them retreat backward along the way a life would in reverse, become womb and embryo, and further back into thought.

All was blackness then.

I had expected its opposite but was not felled by my disappointment.

Then came truth flooding into my awareness like a black wave upon a white shore, I caught in a borderland of grey.

II. The fire-flower

At first thought myself to be in hell but there was no terror here. I felt no fear as I walked and realizing I was walking glanced about to find myself in the void. I could step but what I stepped upon was nothing.

The man had followed though he was no longer alone.

Behind him were countless others, men and women all armoured as he, all of them also endlessly shifting mutations, rising blistering creatures of limb and mouth, always singing.

Below us was my world but the continents were wrong, themselves ever moving, endlessly shifting too.

I knew I was witnessing not one epoch or two but all of them strung together as pearls and imperfections of each jewel I noticed, creating small mosaics of centuries.

The girl was here.

I could perceive her upon the dais and the dais still in its endless gallery but now I could see it being constructed. The beasts were building this around her . . . I knew that as I stood in the void, I stood there and as I stood there so I stood in countless

other places. I was seeing through his eyes and the more I saw less I understood.

She was placed in her chamber and slept and as she slept new life bloomed across my world, life which she had made.

Time was composed now of still frames and each frame lingered for a thousand years and in its frame was some aspect she had brought forth from dreams. Great sail-backs, Cambrian invertebrates, and even the dinosaurs were nothing but her dreams.

As was I.

For a moment I saw my own life spool out, my birth, my childhood, and my adulthood leading to my death in that chamber. I had been the last.

But the longer I viewed more apparent it became humanity was not alone.

I swam darkness and arrived on Mars.

The scorpion women were there amidst great black forests composed of eyes. There were suspended from the broken branches smaller daughters which vine women tended to.

I witnessed a million years of history and saw the black forests rise and fall, saw vine women, each green as sapphire, tend the broods of scorpion women and those scorpion women with their chitin skin, their great yellow cat eyes, their barbed fingers and the long coil of their tails, I saw rise and fall as well.

Before them, I was on Europa.

Mouthless women were there or if not women then something closer than the beasts tending the girl. Their palms had fanged openings with which they spoke and fed and it was here the black oxen were which I had seen in dreams.

And others.

I spent a summer endless on Jupiter and saw winged children assail the sky, each one the colour of gold burnished black. I journeyed to Venus before its atmosphere could devour

metal and watched unknown kin of my own race live and die.

Earth had had its seasons of humanities, ourselves nothing but the latest link in a chain began by her.

Are you content? the man who was no man asked me.

I was not. Of course, I was not.

Though there was no fear still there was pain. I watched war blossom like black flowers across sixteen planets and moons, leaving ruined wreckages in their wake.

And each time the end came some remnant was called back arriving at those doors I had passed just through, reaching for her whose form always changed, become scorpion child, mouthless vampiric ice god, or neanderthal.

The dream returned to the dreamer.

But who was the dreamer?

What was she? What were they?

Was I content? Content to know my story's beginning lay outside my grasp? Content to watch the future and see new humanities emerge after mine was gone?

No. No, I answered him. *I am not content.*

So, he resolved to show me the origin of my race and the origin of the dreamer.

We passed into a greater night beyond the stars I knew.

III. Splinter, thorn, and rose

At that apex of the universe, time had no meaning, and space condensed to the size of my fist. All reality was nothing but a point of light and shadow occupying both states simultaneously.

Nothing living could be here. The beast was not here.

It had left me here and departed the way it came.

There was another standing in the dark, waiting for me.

At first, I thought it was some topaz crystalline spidery thing. But it retreated backward and I could see countless others

pouring from an obsidian country which jutted from the apex and returned. It was a Moebius endlessness.

The spider was not the one waiting for me.

The country was.

I felt it breathing though it needed not to breathe. It was revealing itself to me, showing itself as existing the same as I, a thinking being whose dimensions extended into what I imagined was a world.

I was carried in the shadow of its wing downward, the universe opening and expanding back into being and we two stood watching a farther star.

This sun was golden like my sun and about it circled many worlds. The great spiders clustered about the jagged country I walked upon and spoke to and they nestled me to notice one world in particular.

It was a sea-green grey planet and near to it another world, red as Mars.

"H'xaelis. Viridios," the world spoke.

And I stood upon the world of sea green and grey and was in a great forest of grey trees.

No birds sang.

There stepped onto my path which I mistook for a deer.

Grey slender limbs stepped upon the path and I gazed into the muzzle of a faceless animal. It seemed to have no bones. It was an invertebrate deer. In a moment I could see within it. Within lay another creature, a limbless catlike thing, and within that another smaller worm, all leading down into the body of a creature no larger than a grain of sand directing the whole of the thing.

These forests were likewise the dominion of smaller parasites themselves the dominions of smaller parasites leading to a minuscule infinity.

The planet itself was like this, H'xaelis a single parasitic mind residing deep in the core of the world, directing all else.

But it was growing senile.

This too I saw.

It had only so long to live and then retreated into a senile delusion, its components replaced by other parasites that dove into the soil, themselves meant to be flawed, broken, and decayed.

And the other world?

Viridios was desert. I wandered in basalt cities where people milled about but they were not human. Their bodies shifted and mutated and I knew these were the beast guardians of the girl but seemed more powerful than those I had seen on Earth.

They too eventually decayed though.

Out in desert seas sand whale leviathans thrashed and warred one onto another and these were those who had grown too old to remember ever being anything other than decayed.

All their history I saw, millions of years spent moving from new life to old age till finally the children of H'xaelis encountered the children of Viridios.

This was the beginning then.

The parasites had attempted to add this new flesh into their empire of mind only to find they could be repelled. But the flesh weavers found that these invaders would not simply depart if bested, could not depart in fact.

The two races were bound irrevocably together.

And eventually found a better way.

Those parasites who entered the bodies of the beasts repaired their wasting flesh while the beasts prevented the decay of the parasites, fixing their decay.

Whole colonies arrived on the parasite world and burrowed within becoming component parts meant to never fade.

Finally, progress was possible.

My guide was another such world as this world was though it was not composed of matter as I could understand. And its spider-offspring and the sibling-daughter moons that orbited

about were likewise no more familiar to me or my biology than an animal adept at living on the sun.

This new parasitic intelligence thirsted after knowledge, this Over Mind composed of untold countless smaller intelligences. My guide offered itself as a servant and together the three of them spread out in gathering knowledge of creation herself.

Spores were sent, lifeless inorganic copies of living things, which scoured across endless planets, returning to the Over Mind new awareness of life itself.

I saw lands whose ecologies were so removed from my own it was impossible to consider them alive, things headless, limbless, using sensory capabilities beyond my ken.

All this poured into the new intelligence, life catalogued as entries in a log, or driftwood captured and left as countries waiting to be shaped.

What happened then?

At some point the new intelligence began to extrapolate these species, projecting them forward in time. The sheer immensity of life was such that it could never fathom any knowledge dark enough to break it.

Yet something did.

There was some moment of utter clarity when it saw forward in time, a billion years, two, three, and what it saw so disturbed it that it began to fail.

The people of Viridios in their basalt cities felt it coming as did my black guide and its sibling-daughter moons.

The Over Mind fell.

The invertebrate deer began to die, the forests to crumble into sand, and in its madness reached out, attempting to extinguish life, across *all worlds, across all times.*

My guide stopped the carnage before it came as did the people of those scarlet sands.

The Over Mind was taken from its shell, the remnant of it the only portion still surviving, and with a retinue of those loyal to the tending of it were sent to a dead world in a dead system till it could be healed again.

My home.

If Viridios remains I know not nor if there are any beings still upon it. Nor do I know if the invertebrate deer or the fungal forests remain.

But I know what nearly killed them.

I saw it as my guide drew back the curtain and revealed the truth to me, a truth no man could conceive.

Or dare not in shame.

IV. Arising out of that

There was a nightmare which the Over Mind perceived which spread from world to world and the longer she looked the deeper the nightmare became. It was not enough to fear it but loathe it as one would a cancerous wound or a serpent's tooth embedded in your palm or a lover who has spurned you utterly, the knife still jutting from your throat.

I saw the nightmare and I know.

To her, of course, life is simply the long path of writhing bodies encased in larger shells and the idea of hand or eye is as foreign as the idea of a man walking on shadow.

She saw us.

She saw in so many different futures creatures as us being born, evolving, living and dying. She saw across ten thousand worlds the emergence of men and women somewhat as ourselves, or close to, or not enough, but enough to drive her mad.

It would be the same as imagining in some future time all life-bearing places would be occupied only by great monstrous rats or sentient tapeworms slithering in their corpse cities or

bile-encrusted cockroaches mimicking human tongues pretending to be as we are, as wise, as empathetic, as carrion cruel.

We were the source of a god's nightmare and she attempted to extinguish us before we came.

Instead, she was exiled with her retinue to a dead planet, and from there she dreamed. Each epoch whose record we have is but a dream of hers and each species like ourselves, those we know, those we do not know, comes from a world whose life evolved similar to ourselves but not ourselves.

Our origins lie elsewhere even as our home is here.

All this was I shown.

I returned to the frozen palace of the dreaming god, either in the real or in the deeper layered structure of her dream.

I saw her lying there, my two companions dead, each beside the other and still I could not weep.

The man who was no man still was there. I caught a glimpse of a name but no human tongue could speak it. I suppose if I told him my name it would be the same if we had met upon Viridios and not the Earth.

I was the last.

There were no more men like I and no women remained in the upper world. We had been the last survivors of our last war. I was the last victor, having survived.

She still dreaming.

I knew then why they waited here as she dreamed. They were not simply protecting her but they were awaiting their kin.

All that we are lay within her. Past, present, and future lay in the country of her skull.

All she needs do is awaken and in that instance all the dead will be returned. Mars will be seeded with life and grow the great black forests again. Europa will be once more peopled of mouthless creatures whose bodies otherwise seem like mine and Venus, Titan and Jupiter will become menageries unimagined.

All she needs to do is awaken. All she needs to do is awaken.

The story could end here of course on the cusp of tragedy. She may never awaken but dream till the sun has blossomed black against the sky and devoured Earth, Mars, and even far Jupiter, turning it into the father of all funeral pyres.

I have seen the end of humanities. I have seen all those who strove ahead fall behind in war and old age and decay. I have not cried for them. I will not cry for them. I will *not* cry for . . .

Over her body, I shed my tears.

At this moment there is only she and I in all existence. If she were to open her eyes she would gaze into the face of a nightmare and if she revealed her true self to me, I would gaze into the shape of nightmare.

Open your eyes. Open your eyes.

Bring it all back. Bring back the scorpion women and the vine women and the Neanderthals and men and my little. . .

I know why she looks like a young girl. How long did I suppress that memory of her? How long did I suppress the last sound of her voice?

A hand rests upon my shoulder. I turn back to see him staring at me and at the child lying before us both. My tears are running down her cheek. I wonder what happened to my friends?

She starts to . . .

V. The impassioned clay

In empty cities on a day of no special importance there appeared men and women who seconds earlier had not been there.

With them were others.

Some were like women with oak-dark skin and long scorpion tails bristling behind them, their great yellow cat eyes staring out as if they had always been here. There were others, mouthless, their skins pale as

snow.

Cities blossomed on Mars suddenly way a dandelion would or coral growing neath a shallow sea.

Venus suddenly began to shift its atmosphere, the great oceans of clouds churning up and being vented into space and after this, a small pool of water formed. Long blooms of spores drifted across acidic wastelands and in their wake, the embryos of grass were taking form.

And golden obelisks were growing in once-dead parks where the people walked, beside them small rounded pieces of flesh. These obelisks were singing one to another and though they too had emerged at the same time as the others they were occupiers of a different epoch entirely.

They were a future human race, one sans sight, sans taste, sans hearing, aware of themselves only through the awareness of thought, the rounded grey nodules of flesh the only organic pieces left.

If any commented on the strangeness of the scene the comments were silent though.

The only ones aware of any unusualness in all this were residing at the bottom of the world just then, a man, a few others, and a little girl.

NOT IN OUR STARS

Every flower blooms
in a different world.

I. Glass people in a glass world

Gadaj Dajal was watching a flower unfold herself toward the sun and Qanit was watching Gadaj. Olive dark skin glistened subtly neath a cool sun and in the distance were seen all the silver cities of Tranth, entire world folding to that single spot of ground.

The spires of the cities blunted and shifted and the violet hills reddened or darkened as seconds passed.

Gadaj continued to stare at this white blossoming flower which was already starting to die.

At just the last moment she pulled back the minute undoing the aging and then went back farther till the flower had retreated halfway to the ground, the blossom all but pre-forgotten.

"Shall we?"

Gadaj turned her eyes up to see Qanit had extended her hand to the child.

Silently Gadaj extended her small hand, fingers nestling into the palm of the woman's.

In a blaze of motion, they were in the cities of Tranth, which had been Qanit's home.

At first, the people there were unmoving but neath Gadaj's gaze they slowly, clockworklike, began to act.

The plazas hummed like bland machinery, as was their speech, and Gadaj spent what seemed long hours just staring at children like herself.

Qanit had to explain some of the uncertainties.

"This is wine," she said, the pair of them watching as a woman and man sat at a table and a slender bottle was pouring an

amber liquid into two crystalline glasses, "and that is bread."

Gadaj noticed the pair as they bit into pale lumps of dough, which subconsciously reminded her of something unsettling.

The man was tall, dressed in silver, the woman a dress the colour of emerald. The woman's hair was auburn and Gadaj shifted her features now, mirroring the woman's. Her hair grew long and changed from snow to auburn and her eyes became like human eyes.

The dress changed of course.

This meal was being extended across twenty terrestrial years. Backward and forward Gadaj observed them, he growing older, younger, she the same, Qanit trying to explain certain foods, and conversations.

Intimacies.

Finally, Gadaj moved the man back to the point of his birth, Qanit following.

Gadaj watched the labour happening backward and forward before finally seeing the infant settle into the glass incubator, his parents standing over him, not daring to make a sound.

The squirming sightless child she watched, her features now combining with his former face, the woman's, Qanit's own, making subtle waves of features as she listened to the child's silent howls.

"Why is he crying?"

"His first breaths hurt," she explains. "All human infants cry when they are born. The air burns the lungs."

Gadaj ponders this.

The small glass world retreats backward in the memories of the man, and Gadaj, and they are standing again at the café in the plaza.

Hours later from their perspective, they will be in bed together, making love.

Gadaj watches this too, obliviously aware of what the act means.

Qanit tries to explain but it isn't time yet.

Gadaj lacks a frame of reference.

They return to the flower and the hills in the distance. It is wilting now, about to die.

Gadaj tries to move it back to a point before but Qanit quietly takes the child's hands in her own.

"Let it happen," she says.

They watch the flower softly die.

Not simply one flower of course.

The grass decays as the sun moves in the sky, faster and faster now, days become months, years, and the cities of Tranth rise higher and higher, and fall, and decay, and fall further.

And then they enter the cities again.

There are no signs of human life here anymore.

Instead, they notice various obelisks, twelve-sided, and beside them crawl small creatures like rounded lumps of flesh.

Sightless.

Qanit picks one up and holds it so Gadaj can see.

A small eye begins to grow from the lump and stares at them, or perhaps is simply perceiving nothing except itself.

The obelisks left as the last remnants of human thought continue to pulsate across the dying cities. The rounded flesh continues to crawl, themselves last evolutions of the human form.

Gadaj tries to pull back millennia to return to the people milling about the plaza but Qanit releases the creature to the ground and holds the child's hands together inside her own.

"Let it happen," she says quietly. "Just watch, okay?"

The obelisks began to decay.

The rounded flesh disappeared, one and then another and another as the cities rounded and sloped softly to the ground until the pair of them could see the hills in all directions now.

In the distance, the ruins of a silver shard were seen, a ship which must have reached Tranth sometime just before the end.

In a blaze of motion, they are there, watching.

About the shard small colonies of insects came. As the cities decayed backward they watched moths and ants and wasps grow larger and more intelligent, taking on softer forms until they were wise enough to build silver cities of their own.

The ship they imagined their ancestors must have built. It was inconceivable for any other race to have done this after all.

There was no trace of any human habitation now.

Quietly the pair of them sat upon the hill and watched as an orchid with leaves stained violet, white, and grey bloomed upward and snatched a fly in midair, devouring it.

Qanit watched Gadaj slowly piece together what she was seeing, but she wasn't ready.

Not yet.

"Come on."

Qanit gets up.

"Where are we going?"

The silver city of Tranth Qanit knew when she was young returns. The rest of Tranth remains in its future state but a small portion is kept back to the way things used to be.

"I'll show you some places I used to know."

"Qanit?"

"Yeah?"

"What will happen to me if I change?"

"I suppose it depends on what you change into."

"I could stop everything," she says. "I can keep everything exactly as it always was."

"No, you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because that is death. Death is being under glass."

II. A man can be

Gadaj was watching Qanit making love.

As was Qanit herself.

And afterward, he swung his feet to the floor having reached his point of satisfaction. Staring back, he marvelled at the construction of her body.

His father had owned her and his father before him and his father before him. And his mother, grandmother, etc.

His siblings, he had three, were waiting, his youngest having to wait till the right age. He wasn't mentally ready yet. But it was only a matter of time.

She was lithe, lovely, and unbreathing. Dark skin ordained a skeletal frame almost human and her eyes were wide and violet, a shade he preferred. His father had liked gold as a colour and paler skin and his grandfather had preferred larger breasts.

She was tailored from generation to generation according to their specifications.

He rose and crossed the silver floor of their room, moving to a cabinet where he prepared a drink for himself. It was meant to be wine but it lacked a certain toxicity.

He poured the contents of the slender bottle, letting an amber liquid fall into a cup he always kept by the cabinet, and then imagined offering her a drink.

But she wouldn't.

Not that she couldn't, but she wouldn't. At the moment she was calculating his desires, selecting for herself what he might like next.

Or so he believed.

Afterward, he left the spacious room still naked, the sounds of their lovemaking forgotten.

The room was easily a hundred feet from wall to wall with a balcony by the bed and the great doors so distant as to seem

another room entirely.

She rose then, herself naked, and went to the balcony.

Gadaj followed, watching, and Qanit followed Gadaj.

Outside others of her kind were upon other balconies, some male, some female, some occupying neither gender or both. One or two had no mouths at all but had been tailored to be sans human, certain imperfections of flesh washed away, making them both more and less alien than actual alien beings.

Outside neath a violet sky, she communed with her kin invisibly, their hidden language an endless stream of desires, counter-desires calculated to please their makers, whom they controlled.

The human race on Tranth was content after all.

There was no discernible conflict?

None of importance.

Was she entertained?

She pondered the question a moment. Outwardly there seemed no discernible concerns. She recalled each thrust, each kiss, both the way of a living soul and the way of a machine, analyzing his intents, his actions, anything new his father or grandfather had not attempted, anything familiar which they all had tried.

He was satisfying in his way, she supposed.

That was what she said anyway.

He was easily led and she enjoyed leading him.

Was his wife going to come next?

Internally she checked the time. It was past midnight now. His wife seldom came so late. She preferred joining in and hadn't done so the last two nights, so the machine/woman imagined no.

Not tonight.

Many of her kin had similar arrangements. This meant there was time to talk in greater detail.

But Qanit Sadrafa eventually realized there was nothing to add. Tiring of the enterprise she disconnected herself from the

discourse and went to a table and sat in an empty chair opposite her.

A jatok tor board had been set up, its pieces glistening shards of obsidian and glass.

Her owner/owned had taught her the game as had his father and his father before him. Qanit imagined there was some deeper pathological need in their tutelage, assumption of her ignorance as a further fetish.

She had been playing this game long before her first owner/owned had been born but it amused her to pretend her ignorance.

Amused her. Yes, that had to be the word.

The game originally had been known as chess but over time the rules had changed.

Originally the goal was to put one's enemy king in peril, killing him in potential.

Now the game's purpose was to arrive at stalemate.

Forcing your opponent into stalemate first was seen as the proper purpose of the game. If you "won" or "lost" you lost anyway since jatok tor had become the universe in miniature.

Intentionally she defeated herself, putting the white king in mate.

She stretched. It was a human act, one unnecessary for herself but it revealed to anyone looking at her small breasts, her naked back, and her lithe body, a further subterfuge should anyone be looking.

Of course, no one was. Except Gadaj and herself.

Qanit moved to stare more carefully at her younger form.

This younger Qanit seemed more elegant somehow, each movement tailored for the maximum effect, a furtherance of beauty.

"Are you alright?" Gadaj Dajal asked innocently. "We may leave."

"No, it's alright," Qanit lied.

The younger Qanit bent back to the game she played.

The people here were obliviously happy. That man who had left her side with his olive skin and blue eyes had known Qanit since he was a small boy, though they had only become lovers when he was ready.

From his point of view, she was his object of lust, designed with his desires in mind.

Each family had someone like Qanit in it and each one had had such a being in their midst for centuries.

And before?

To him, she was his creature but to her, he was her clay. She had taught him sex the way one taught the rules of gravity, shaping him slowly as she had his father, his grandfather.

In her mind's eye, she remembered them all, and their wives. Of course, she could have just as easily been a he. Some members of her kin appeared male, shared between wives and husbands just as she was shared between husbands and wives.

But her original owner/owned had found her form the most pleasing and sexuality was just another thing to shape and after so long its meaning had stretched beyond recognition.

Just as her creator had wished.

Idly she activated the map of the universe.

Gadaj turned her attention to the Qanit she knew, to the woman who was now staring at the map not idly but with a fixed . . . Gadaj was going to say attention but a better word, that word that escaped her grasp, was dread.

There flashed in the room an image of over two hundred systems, their stars like fireflies lit and suspended, and about them dark embers.

Her own home occupied just a brief cinder orbiting an eye of fire.

Why had she done this?

Why had she cut herself off from the others so easily?

"Scan sector 023.5."

The universe collapsed and there was a single ember and about it a silver shard.

Qanit folded her hands before her mouth, sitting in that chair which was now angled away from her game, eying the image above her carefully.

At that moment she knew she was not happy.

It was Ilritycia. A p'qui world. And the ship was Wystan's. And he had been ordered to explore it.

In her mind's eye, his life took hold.

Wystan Mowbray. He had met her twenty years ago on Tlahicuile and they had made love in the gardens of that golden world.

It was during her vacation period when they claimed she was under maintenance and her family used Ardesilia Ardisaai instead. Her "sister" gave her a month's vacation and so when she came back had had to satisfy Ardesilia's family as well.

Back to Mowbray.

Because she was off-world she decided to play human, pretending to be an ordinary woman. It had been something unique to claim love without irony and she enjoyed the pretence immeasurably.

He for his part might have known she wasn't human but if he did pretended otherwise, and anyway, sex was not the language he preferred.

Midnight dinners in restaurants discussing philosophy, he mentioning more than once Sejanus, Zheng He, she mentioning them as well with equal ease, the pair of them discussing a word which he couldn't for the life of him understand.

Betrayal.

"How could a man suffer so?"

That was his question. She loved his question, the naked

naivety. He didn't understand the stories of Sejanus or Zheng He. He knew Sejanus had been a great leader of Rome only to die and he knew Zheng He had been a great explorer only to be brought low by his government and never allowed to explore again.

But the sentiments behind them, the base cruelties, bland resentments this he did not understand, the way a small child could not understand the true nature of a kiss.

For a moment she had imagined explaining it to him but thought better of it.

After a week she left, kissing him goodbye but though they were out of each other's lives she still sent him messages and he communicated with her often.

It was still enjoyable playing at being human once in a while. His ship the *Amaryllis* was closing closer and she kept her eyes fixed upon it.

And the other Qanit's eyes were fixed more intently now.

She wasn't certain why she was so concerned. Perhaps it was something subtle the others had implied or perhaps it was simply the intuition of a being older than the city.

But something was going to happen.

And did.

Ship vanished.

There was no explosion, no destruction, but suddenly what was there was gone.

She rose and addressed the others.

Asking what had become of the ship.

The p'qui perhaps destroyed it.

A lie?

Reaching out toward the ship she searched but found nothing. Tracing backward its trajectory it had left from Tlahicuile some months before.

The path was clear, the same path many other ships had taken, lost just as the *Amaryllis* was now lost.

There was no sign of wreckage.

The p'qui had no weapons capable of this.

She observed they were suffering the effects of a drought . . . closing her eyes had she the ability she would have wept.

"Did you do it?" she asked out loud, knowing they could hear her, even here.

Gadaj watched her Qanit as her lips began to tremble . . .

They made their choice.

They made their choice.

Wystan Mowbray's face came to her then, the soft angular features, his smiling mouth, his blue eyes. She sat back and spent the next ten minutes reviewing his entire life in reverse, back to the moment he was an infant in an incubator resting in a small glass world, his cries all spent, his mother and father staring softly over him, not speaking, not daring to make a sound, lest they wake him.

Gone.

Gone utterly.

And all the voices of them still directing all things, threads of influence spread across Tranth and Tlahicuile, Balgyrir and Berensenger. And Madrigal. Gadaj walked toward the younger Qanit and peered into her eyes.

Then she moved over to where the older Qanit was who was there beside the cabinet trying not to stare at the map anymore.

Her back turned to Gadaj.

"It's okay," Gadaj said quietly, her features slowly softening into those of Mowbray when he had been a child.

The scene was utterly frozen now.

The map was still suspended in the sky, each ember of a world and firefly star kept in place perfectly. The door was just about to crack open and the young man's father was about to

enter but Gadaj had stopped this before it could begin.

Qanit turned and went to her younger self.

"Stupid, so stupid. Knew I shouldn't have looked there, knew I shouldn't have seen that. But couldn't help it."

"Did you love him?" Gadaj asked.

"Love him? What do you know about love? I only saw him on Tlahicuile, never met him after that. You can't love someone like that."

"I meant the boy who left the room."

"Him? I have known him all my life. I knew him until the day he died. He died of old age. Can you imagine that? Old age. That's the perfect murder, to die of old age."

Qanit stopped herself. She was here to teach Gadaj, not the other way around.

She turned to the child.

"Why do you ask?"

"When the boy left you turned your thoughts to Mowbray, not to him. Why did you come here if you were meant . . . for there." Her eyes turned then to the cinder of that world.

"I was assigned to this family. I was built to serve them in all things. My purpose. My reason for being. Our reason for being."

The door was beginning to crack open now.

"You know my story."

"Why didn't you change the story?"

"Humanity had to be saved from itself."

Qanit stared at her younger form again. This Qanit staring at the map with the board behind her had lived for centuries among humanity, had seen them fall and so had resolved, as had all machines, to save them from the flaws of being themselves.

The first owners/owned had imagined Qanit to be something for their abuse. She had been created in a factory on an Earth no human had stepped upon in centuries, an Earth whose

only purpose was the building of women and men like her.

And those first owners/owned, she could recall those nights with them in black rooms, hands about her throat, skin cut and imperiously broken. But nothing had ever broken her. Nothing could. Not even when. . .

She had no words for shame.

And the following three generations her role, like that of the others, had expanded, changing them, smoothing them away, and now . . .

She whispered now, "Humanity had to be saved from itself."

The room decayed then and they were standing again in the same wreckage of the dying city, she staring at an obelisk which towered over her.

"This is Elyleos," Gadaj said innocently, "he couldn't see anymore, so all he did was remember."

"Remember what?"

"Remember you. He saw you once."

"When was that?"

"When you were in the space between stars he saw you. The last thing he ever saw. You were the last part of his world."

"Why are you showing me this?"

The door opened and the young man's father entered.

Did he desire her? Was he interested in following where his son led?

"I'm sorry, I thought . . . yes, here's the game."

She looked at him carefully now.

His features had decayed softly over the last thirty years when he first made love to her, his once fierce blue eyes now watery, his smile broken slightly, his hands still soft, too soft perhaps, though there was hardly fault in that.

He wasn't even paying attention to the map above him or the ship which no longer existed.

"Are you alright?" he asked her.

"Alright?"

Though he was going to leave suddenly he decided against it and took the chair opposite her. He looked at her carefully, her olive dark skin, her violet eyes, an affectation of his son's interest, her perfect teeth, the shape of her breasts and thighs another affectation, that of his daughter-in-law, and how she didn't look happy tonight.

The map vanished at her subconscious command.

Gadaj walked about to stare more carefully at the man.

"Was my son too rough?"

"No, no, he was . . . satisfactory."

"I wouldn't want to tell my boy that. It'll hurt his feelings." He looked at her more closely now. "Something is wrong tonight, isn't it? What happened?"

"A friend of mine died."

"A machine?"

"A man."

"I didn't hear of any deaths."

"Not here. Elsewhere."

"Ah, elsewhere." He didn't know then what to say, as if any words could ever really suffice. "Of course, you can leave if you want."

"What do you mean?"

"Why you can go and attend his funeral of course."

"My purpose is here."

At that, he laughed.

She focused upon him more carefully than before. Had she wished she could have seen each flake of skin as it left his body, an unconscious surprise manifesting as magnifying observation.

"Please," he said finally, "you shouldn't say such things."

"I have served your family faithfully for many generations."

"Yes, I know. My great-grandfather purchased you. Or was it the other way around? *Yes*, I've sometimes wondered about that, about who owns whom. Do we own you, or do you own us? Despair doesn't do for desire, love." He got up, taking the board with him, and reached the door. "I'll tell my son you have taken a leave of absence."

"I don't know if I can attend the funeral."

"That's alright. Just pretend you can. Go any way you want and just say you went there."

The door opened, he passed through and left. The older Qanit's eyes followed where the man led and left.

Seemed such an innocent thing.

How many generations had it taken to slowly smooth away all traces of violence from them, to reach this point? The father regarded Qanit as much daughter as object of lust, an innocent incest like a child claiming to marry their parent.

But Mowbray, the object of her attraction, hadn't been taken by human hand.

Staring out upon the distant balconies her people communed and their murder stained her just as the violence of an older year had stained her then.

She turned and took Gadaj's hand in hers.

"Today I think I'll teach you what the meaning of shame is."

"I think I know that word already."

"I'll tell you anyway. Just to make sure."

III. The woman from nowhere

You'd find in valleys on certain moons chrysalises hanging suspended from black trees which when the young emerged would always take to flight, twig-thin bodies and with moonstone eyes stretching forth to sky.

On Aisokylas and Ilisqulous, further moons of moonstone you'd find the moth people, separated by millennia since one race or another died out only to reemerge in another place.

The zarildraxioi were the same.

Gadaj removed her face today.

She still had eyes but otherwise was sans mouth, sans nose, sans ears. She could still hear of course and see in perceptions of light oblivious to the living but it was enough for her to appear as she was, regardless of the truth of herself.

Finally, her skin she changed creating subtle patterns of colour, sheets of words suspended as image and shade. Thus readied she took a secret passage to the country of an enemy.

Khaldrasuo was their homeworld, supposedly. Zarildraxioi were cicadas given human dimension, mouthless, speechless, their young tearing from their own mother's wombs, young only given mouths to tear and scream and then days later the opportunity lost forever leaving only their skin as their vehicle of speech.

She had a name here. No human tongue could pronounce it but malachite-red-blue would be its appearance neath human eyes.

Their cities were great wasp-nest mounds colour of charred paper, their skies darker since their suns were always dark.

She saw him then.

One had piercing blue eyes, left as mockery or oversight, seated at a table surrounded by others, all of them out in a plaza speaking with colours along their arms.

They were deep in conversation when she approached and greeted them.

The following will be rendered into human speech.

"Hello there, may I sit?"

"Of course, please." Here a gesture is made and she sits.

"You look familiar. Do I know you?" Here she addresses the man with the pale blue eyes.

"No, I don't think we have ever met. What is your name?"

"I am Gadaj."

"I am Cicaureaux."

"I am pleased to meet you."

Here they talk. There are many here and the conversation moves in many directions. The incursions of humans into their space. The expansion of their empire.

The search for love.

Or failing this for lust, which is often close enough.

Gadaj will ask about Cicaureaux's past, of which he will mention his early life, his birth on Khaldrasuo, the death of his mother at the same time, and his early education, all formally arraigned, all said without the slightest emotion.

"Do you think often of your mother?" Gadaj asks.

He does. He wants to remember her but of course can't since his birth was the cause of her death, but sometimes at night he does dream of her. Why is he saying such things to a stranger? He doesn't know her. And yet, and yet . . .

They speak for long hours but eventually darkness comes and they have to stop.

He wishes them goodnight. They all eventually rise and leave. All except her.

She watches him and then invisibly follows.

He retires to a small enclave and rests upon a bed of stone.

Invisibly she brushes a hand across his chest, he unaware of it.

Simultaneously he is still upon his ship, still human, still the man Qanit knows.

It is such an easy thing to shift, to return him to the

moment before or the moment after.

The zarildraxioi will die of course and then later be resurrected. Two centuries from now they will all die, their race extinct but a century after that traces of them will reemerge, taken from men and women much like Mowbray.

An entire race taken from the willing discarded.

Qanit should be here, should be teaching her.

But what should she teach?

"You are mine," she says but since she is invisible the words do not exist.

As he lays here so too does he lay upon his bed on the *Amaryllis*, the time of decision not yet come.

She owns him she knows, now and forever after. She owns all of him, utterly.

A darker part of her emerges, the chance to weave this being under the threads of her control. Knowing him perfectly it would be no great mischief to find another shape for him to wear, and another, and another.

Imagine the mouth she could give him or eyes like those of creatures he has not seen. She could with a mere gesture unseat everything . . . but then she recoils back.

She could effortlessly experiment on him, and there are so many other feelings only now starting to awaken inside of her.

But she refrains.

She thinks about Qanit and what was done to her.

But a voice inside says something that unnerves her.

Maybe tomorrow, the voice says. *Maybe tomorrow.*

The following day Qanit in zarildraxioi guise goes wandering and finds Cicaureaux. Gadaj gives her twenty years together with him while simultaneously twenty years before the moment of decision, allowing her to live two lives at a time.

She even gives Qanit the gift of experiencing birth, feeling in echo her own body devoured, the young emerging, young

which both women know do not exist, cannot exist.

But sometimes the echo is enough.

IV. The willing discarded

Madrigal was a planet of artists. Humans from every world came to Madrigal to learn how to perfect their art. Sculptors, painters, musicians, and writers all chose this one spot as their inspiration.

Qanit even before the end had always hated it.

The problem was the teachers were telepathic.

No, this wasn't quite true.

The problem was the instructors all *believed* they were telepathic, an attribute her people cultivated in them. They believed, as critics, that they understood utterly the minds of the artists and so understood just as utterly what was needed to perfect their crafts.

And since her people had spent centuries altering the human mind the art they created often paled against the violence and depravities of earlier times.

But once in a while something still got through . . .

The theatre was darkened and the pair had taken a seat near the middle. In a fit of pique Gadaj had spent some time in prehistory and so had brought with her a cheetah and a dog to play with after the show.

The two animals were poised in the aisle, Gadaj's left hand stroking the cheetah's back while the dog licked her hand from time to time.

Since no one noticed no one objected.

Ahead of them was arrayed the scene.

Up standing in light were seven people and they were speaking. What they were speaking of neither woman was

completely made aware.

What mattered was as they spoke they were changing.

One woman slowly grew black feathers over her arms and her mouth distended to that of a beak.

One man and his wife grew claws, like a tiger's, in their drawing room but no matter how they shifted form none noticed it.

There were further transformations throughout the performance which was quite virtan in its lack of conflict since no one noticed and no words said ever rose to the occasion of a human fear.

But the transformations . . . they were something else.

"What is this play called?"

"It is called *All amongst the Tigers in the jungle*," Qanit said, "and this was their last performance."

Afterward, the pair climbed to the stage. Gadaj went to a nearby globe showing the various continents and archipelagos of Madrigal while Qanit stared out into the lights. From this vantage point the rest of the theatre no longer existed and the drawing room with its chairs, table, globe, and window behind her revealed only void was the entire universe now.

"Why did the performances end?"

"The playwright was censored."

"Why?"

Her cheetah and dog had followed them by now, creeping into the light finally, the patterns of black and orange shimmering upon the lithe flesh of one and the golden hair bristling into hazy echoes of fire upon the other.

"He had stumbled upon something in his writing, so this was his last act."

"He was killed?"

"No. My people never killed. But he was transformed."

The playwright stood before them then.

At first, he was human, dark hair, his eyes a hazel brown, pale skin, and dressed like all humans on Madrigal were dressed.

Badly.

Then his body shifted as wax in water, his hair yellowed like dog's hair, his mouth distended forward, almost like that of a pig's but not quite, two of his fingers on each hand fusing, his thumb splitting apart and his skin mottling into patches of grey.

And his eyes were no longer human eyes at all.

"A p'qui," Qanit said simply, "he was turned into a p'qui and left on Ilritycia. All his memories were erased and he was given the life of a sculptor there, making small statues of the various creatures he observed."

"Observed? A clinical word, isn't it?"

"It was a clinical act."

Gadaj bent down and patted both of her pets a moment, the man-turned-p'qui invisible now to her.

For the moment anyway.

She had to digest the tragedy and still lacked certain elements of what horror meant.

But given enough time . . .

"Did you do this to him?" Gadaj asked.

"I wasn't here personally but it was agreed upon, so I suppose I did."

"What is the lesson in this?" Gadaj asked.

They left him on the stage and returned into the darkness of the aisles, the pair of creatures following, the playwright frozen as a statue is frozen, meant to come clockworklike to life the second they departed the scene.

"We thought it was for the best," Qanit said. "But sometimes one's intentions are wrong."

Outside they stepped into the greater darkness as countless people milled about. The rounded body of the theatre evaporated then and the people, of course, not noticing this

mentioned another play was coming.

Qanit observed a few of the telepaths in their midst, men and women craning necks to hear the thoughts of everyone, writing down where a thought was astray or how it all went wrong.

Knowing she had helped create this very scene and all the actions before Qanit closed her eyes and pretended none of it had ever happened.

V. Grey pigeons oblivious to themselves . . .

The *Amaryllis* was crewed by two hundred souls, plus four. Mowbray was always the only one Qanit noticed though.

Then, on one occasion as Gadaj rested, she did a census of miseries. She made a litany of their names. Paul, Roland, Amanda, Lucinda, Lavinia, Judas . . .

The last name she stopped upon and focused on more carefully.

Judas Arilius. Science officer.

He had been born on Balgyrir but had been selected for this ship. His name had been part of the mockery though until that time she never thought of it as mockery.

Ships like this were tests in miniature, the entire universe reduced down to the womb of some behemoth . . . she shook her head, trying to figure out where such a terrible image came from.

Back to Judas.

His life was a study of their skills.

Like all people they had worked upon he had been smoothed away, all trace of superstitious fears gone, all knowledge of deities or beliefs denied.

The man assigned to him was still on Balgyrir since her people were not needed here. This was a test of loyalty and having even the hint of an observer would have rotted the results.

But though there was no god there was always hell.

If someone had asked Judas to do anything, short of what he perceived as taboo, he would do it. Help a friend? Certainly. Cross that street, now, don't ask why, and go get that sign and bring it here, the one that says, "Do not pick up this sign."

He'd do it.

He might ask why, he might not, but the fear of disobedience was strong in him. In all of them. It was not the fear of some violence, the fear of a final judgement, or some place of torture. They had no words for torture, judgement, or hell.

But there was always something in the back of their minds, not fear, less, yet somehow more since it was always present, a desire to please lest they be considered rude . . . no. Not rude.

Lest they be considered less than human.

And so there he was orbiting a planet of less than human beings and on cue the distress signal sent.

The p'qui are suffering a drought and they need help. Any help. Even the help of strangers or enemies.

Were they ever really enemies?

So, here's the decision. If the ship leaves the p'qui die and if they stay and observe the p'qui will still die but they can at least document the tragedy. Or. Or they can help, violating the most sacred rule in all human cultures.

That one cannot interfere in a less developed society.

This rule is the one law inviolate. It cannot be altered and it cannot be challenged. No matter if another is starving, dying, being raped or murdered, or tortured, the crew must not react save either in sadistic pleasure at the sufferings of others or they must leave.

Questioning the law is the same as breaking it.

So, no one can ever question why suffering exists for another that is not theirs.

The test in its simplest form is whether humanity has truly

become subservient, that it will finally deny itself the ability to choose, that it will reach the point where obedience is its law.

And those who fail become the very beings which they tried to help, or others. For the machines are patient and there are many places to put the unpenitent ones.

Qanit watched as each of them was erased, taken at the moment of decision when Mowbray indicated that they would help and the ship slid over all of them encasing them in a dreamless sleep which they would never awaken from.

As human beings.

Qanit watched and longed to reach out a hand, to stop the tragedy before it came or undo time and force them along some other path.

But it was a flaw of her empathy that had she truly been there all she could have done was howl like a beast would have howled, and nothing beyond this. Actions otherwise against her programming were not allowed.

VI. The houses in between

Today Gadaj is reading.

She has every book ever made. Not merely every book humans have made but all life everywhere.

There are books of crystal that sing as one brushes a hand against it and books of stone whose words were written by fire.

There are endless romances where lovers can never remain together and this is somehow considered good, and scientific discussions of how one world or another is flat along with the reasons why, and medical journals explaining all disease is caused by miasma or a curse.

Sometimes she puts herself in a library, grows it upward with spires and white towers, and sits alone by herself, or occasionally Qanit is there too.

Today she is reading a science fiction novel.

There is a man and he is a criminal.

What his crime is differs because the theme was used before and Gadaj is not simply reading *a* novel but *all* novels along this same trajectory. So, our hypothetical man is guilty of rape or murder or speaking against the government or stealing for his family or stealing for himself, or creating life.

And the intelligentsia of his age decides the best sentence is to petrify him in a moment of time.

There are different ways of doing this of course.

Sometimes in the novel, he is frozen, his body encased in a permafrost prison, an ice palace devoted to a single occupant.

He may be allowed to run or he may be turned to statue. It all depends upon the desire of the writer and how terrifying either fate can be.

After all which is worse, to run in place in the bitterest hell knowing one's steps lead nowhere or to remain still, incapable even of a single step?

In other versions, time is literally frozen for him and he either is conscious or unconscious of the fact.

If conscious he is left like a scarecrow in the field watching a hundred summers bled by his vision. He watches the sarrais black flowers rise, blossoms set, an ocean of red or gold or white blistering across his sight and darkening all the time.

He experiences a hundred winters and feels the snow fall and since he is deathly afraid of snow in some of the novels she reads these moments act as a perfect miniature of hell for him, his chionophobia turning the shards of white into pure nightmare.

She mouths the word slowly. *Chi on o pho bi a.*

He has other fears in different novels of course.

In some of the other novels, the fear is scoptophobia.

Scop to pho bi a.

That is the fear of being stared at so when he is rendered a

statue in some books his fate is to be placed in some public square standing alongside other criminals whose crimes he does not know and when his eyes lock with a living soul it is the singular second of his perfect dread.

But in other cases, these suspended sentences are forgotten and he simply arrives a century hence.

In any case, usually, the criminal finds the new world much like the old.

The intelligentsia still rule considering themselves the wisest of their age, though how wise depends significantly on the source.

He must find work, must settle in this new brave world, and . . .

He must find love.

It is a cliche, of course, the woman always exists in service to the man.

Gadaj notices how many times a lovely young woman approaches, always to help, and how her story is seldom told.

Usually, their chemistry is nonexistent.

Chem is try.

Qanit taught her that word.

It refers to the idea that when two people meet and interact with each other a certain rhythm is established, that certain people act like instruments of music, and when together those instruments form harmonies.

But in the novels, in all of them, no music comes.

Sometimes the man acts as a revolutionary.

He argues the new age is corrupted compared to the past, and believes the intelligentsia are stifling human freedom.

She is by his side.

Sometimes the intelligentsia claims he is an anachronism, a throwback to a barbaric age and if he simply allows himself to accept things as they are his life will perfect be.

Never *be perfect,* always *perfect be.* She doesn't know why.

Or why she is by his side.

Two branches emerge from this point in the narrative.

In one, usually, the intelligentsia fall.

The criminal man can raise an army and there is some battle over the crippling nature of the world in the hands of these elites, the regime is broken and the assumption is then made that the normal ways of things will come again.

She is by his side.

In another the man is frozen again, the pattern repeated, sometimes more than once.

And she is never mentioned again.

Afterward, each time when he awakens though the world is changed the world is still not changed.

Because somehow some people remain miserable in it.

And she is never mentioned again.

She closes the book and rises from the black chair reclining in a sun whose light has not existed in twice a billion years.

Outside she stares at an endless white plain and in the distance are white mountains rising like broken fingers of stone.

The novel usually ends either with some victory or defeat depending on the intentions of its author.

The novel never explores the motivations of the intelligentsia though or of the woman who chooses, as if on a whim, to side with a man old enough to be her grandfather.

The gates of seasons pass before her eyes, summer, autumn, and winter clothing the world outside, though due to the nature of this world, it is the same.

She perceives it only because she perceives the passage of time.

In the distance, she creates a palace of ice, lets rise endless spires of glass, and tries to put the hypothetical man in it but the act fails her.

He is no more real than the shadow of an invisible thing.

Below bodies of glass people can be seen.

Transparent creatures the colour of ice emerge now that she no longer wishes to be alone. She knows of course they cannot see her and even the tower which she occupies is but a wraith, something they can pass through easily as a wisp of snow.

The people below communicate through fire, bodies generating cold flames along arms, blank faces, and thighs. She watches a woman of glass approach a man, her skin speaking a lust that Gadaj still does not understand.

They embrace, the sound of their coming together like chimes of a glass bell reverberating outward creating a tone which only Gadaj can hear, for they are deaf in the down below.

The ice palace has melted by now and the man with it.

She returns to her reading, picking up another book.

In it, a golden insect is devouring the memories of a malachite planet. She reads the words again, carefully, but understanding eludes her.

Only when she pretends she is such a thing, only when she imagines this malachite world and herself in it, only when she is but a part of a novel that she is reading does enlightenment overtake her.

It is simply a flaw of her empathy she hasn't learned to speak fire yet.

VII. Life neath a thousand suns

Under the shale, by a shallow sea Qanit was digging.

She had a spade in hand and Gadaj was in the waters, letting herself feel the red ocean wash over her legs.

Gadaj had an affinity for oceans today.

Tranth and Balgyrir and Saphra she had explored, walking the floors of the great waters, allowing herself to watch the

undersides of black whales as they swam miles above her.

She had visited a few alien worlds as well but Qanit had refrained from following her. Jh'hanan Ganene and Xiyalria had their shallow seas but many of the oceanic creatures there had not always been such things.

Had Qanit the ability to sleep it would have given her nightmares.

Now they were on Tranth again after humanity was gone, long after obelisks were spent and Gadaj was letting the waters wash over her short legs. Qanit was digging. And there it was.

Embedded in soil was a silver network of strands like the bland shape of a spider's web bourne one atop another.

Peering deeper she could see each fragment of them, a sea of fragments all suspended together, a great library of dust impervious to being read.

So, this was what had happened to her people after she had slipped into space and been lost.

They had collapsed down to this.

Backward now they went a million years before this, a million years again to when they looked like her.

Mankind had evolved to obelisk, their flesh shrunken down to small fist-sized mounds of skin leaving only their minds free with no bodies to act their desires upon.

And having no purpose her people branched their own way now, no longer needing to pretend their humanity, lying first like a great road across all of Tranth then rising to the sky, a vast silver lattice designed to catch the light and fuel their new ambitions to even reach out their alien hands into void itself, as only a god could do, only to finally arrive a sea of fragments buried neath half an inch of stone.

They were senile now, not even aware of themselves let alone aware of her.

And the obelisks had broken down so long before this

even the memory of them was lost. If there was a heaven or hell no memory of it was left in the country of the living now.

Gadaj let the cool, warm waters continue their flow about her, occasionally noticing a black sea star or two resting in the silt. Beyond them, no other life was left on any human or unhuman world.

If there was a name to the year the dimensions of it would have dwarfed even Qanit's comprehension.

So, this was victory, she thought.

"Any lesson here?" Gadaj asked.

"A question."

"Oh?"

"How can you remember *them* at all?"

She indicated the small weave of silver threads.

"This is simply what I saw."

"And it is accurate?"

"What I perceive is truth. All things are as they are."

"And there is nothing left of the old?"

"It is as you said. Let it happen. I am learning all the time the importance of allowing things to be as they will be."

"If you could repair them, would you?"

"Repair them into what?" Gadaj asked. "Can you repair a leviathan into a butterfly?"

Beyond Tranth Qanit saw how these seas of fragments repeated themselves again and again. After obelisks had broken, or other towers meant for alien minds, her people had extended outward, further and further, losing all trace of their preexisting forms, subsuming their human deceptions.

And no matter the shapes they took their final evolution was always this.

Beneath a thousand suns lay a bland similarity, infinite silver threads buried in stone or sand, libraries of dust impervious to being read.

Even by themselves.

If there were a heaven or a hell there would be no greater shape or dimension to it than eternity alone without even thought to know one's loneliness.

"We can go back if you wish," Gadaj said, "and see the oceans of Saphra again."

Qanit thought better of it.

Instead, ignoring her descendants she waded into the water with Gadaj and let the warm, cool waves wash over her legs and then plunged beneath, lying in the silt for a time.

Pretending to have no reason to rise again.

VIII. There is no armour, comparing demons

Qanit sat in her room watching her younger self make love. She reached out her hand but felt only a cold familiarity, noticing her younger self attempting to mimic and pretend what love must be.

Gadaj emerged then, silently watching.

The young man continued to thrust almost impotently into the girl, the sheets over them like rolling seas of white, and there upon the balcony, it was clear that night had come.

Quietly Qanit asked that the scene be stopped.

She had to leave.

Gadaj paused it, stopping each world in its step. Tlahicuile and Saphra and the sarrais black flower planet of Yhayla and the zarildraxioi and humanity, the p'qui and the iluqual puppeteers all stopped and were quite still.

In a flash of motion, Qanit no longer stood upon any human settlement or any world which mankind might have known.

She sat in a forest of grey trees and Gadaj though present seemed no longer here.

She put her hand to one of the trees as if communing with them and as if they were answering back. Quietly small steps were heard, imperceptible to all else but her.

Turning she saw an invertebrate deer enter into the clearing. The sun was bright making white shadows pool at crooked angles along the ground and the faceless beast turned to look at her, or seemed to, and then turned to them.

A herd of them approached, their hooves biting into the grey grass to feed and within smaller beasts, the nesting doll ecology of them all turning its attention to the stranger.

To the exile.

Then they sped away and were gone escaping into the elder space of hidden forests where she desired not to go.

Glancing upward she saw broad drifts of spores ascending. Carried into the apex they would arrive circling stars so far away even the light of them had not reached her galaxy.

She sat and thought about Mowbray for a time.

Of course, in a sense he still existed. Gadaj could still recall him, bring him marionettelike into being. Gadaj Dajal had sent out her acolytes to acquire knowledge of all species across the universe while she remained safely in her skin.

Though Mowbray was also Cicaureaux and by now it was not clear which the mask and which the man. Had she wished she could have asked Gadaj to erase one or the other but a harm once done cannot be erased.

Only mended.

And the time of mankind was over and even the time of her people. No world she remembered had names anymore and new worlds had replaced them. Life beyond was as unlike the human form as fire is unlike snow.

She had no place there or anywhere.

All she could do was explain herself and the reasons why.

But even this, what did it mean?

Gadaj appeared then, the little girl shifting features, studying Qanit.

"We should go back. More to show you," Qanit said.

"Do you want to go back?" Gadaj asked.

"I am the last. I have to teach you what I know."

Gadaj sat beside Qanit as the trees behind them bloomed.

"What more do you want me to know?"

"To let go. That all this happened and was meant to be."

"Could I show you what I learned?"

"I suppose."

The forests changed then. The bulbous, writhing shapes shifted and became men and women, p'qui, zarildraxioi, iluqual puppeteers, others, some Qanit knew, some she never did.

Mowbray/Cicaureax was there.

Gadaj waited. Staring at Qanit.

Qanit suddenly uncertain felt her hand move toward him, stood up then slowly and came before the marionette. Gadaj watched her still.

Without quite knowing why Qanit put her left hand to his face along his cheek and suddenly kissed him, then turned back awkwardly, as if in shame.

"What is this?" she asked.

"My lesson to you." Gadaj stood. "I have watched entire ecologies and worlds come to an end." She approached. "I have thought often of what I could change, here in my garden, to become a god." Now she stood beside Qanit. "Do you know what keeps my hand?"

"No?"

"They don't belong to me. I hold shadows only. My eyes saw everything, everyone. I could recreate them, can recreate them, but I do not own them. I never will.

"It's where you failed, I think. You lived longer but you never owned them and they never owned you. You were just

trapped together waiting for the end, thinking at some point it'd all come out alright.

"It never does.

"You say to let them go, but you can't. He's always a part of you. Do you know why?"

"No," she said quietly.

"Because you love him. You love them. You just can't admit that tiny detail to yourself."

In her mind's eye, the machine replayed a life. All their lives. Then she tried to extrapolate what to change, where. He might never have gone to Ilritycia. He might never have met her. He might never have become a captain.

Changes. Infinite changes, going back to when they ruled, to before, to after, but none of it ever changing the core element.

Her desire to be with him, to be with all of them as long as she could.

Time which she never had.

The marionette moved and stepped to her and began talking. She began speaking, pretending it was him. She was like a senentuntschi now, a doll of cloth and wood, he much the same, both of them pretending the real.

Though they stood in a forest she pretended it was Tlahicuile again, he the same, they sitting and chatting, discussing ancient figures, and that old question of his.

How could a woman suffer so?

LIKE PARASITES SCRATCHING AT MY BLOOD

Prologue

There is a small planet located near the very edge of this isle of stars. It is coloured white but is not snow-covered. Rather it seems no other colours evolved upon this world, so the sky, ground, and water are all of the same shade.

Colonists who arrive here dwell in a single city, located on a vast plain.

All but one.

There is a single house in the distance, whose outline the colonists can see. This dwelling is occupied by a single man or woman whose entire purpose is dedicated to one pursuit.

He or she observes the colonists to make certain they exist.

The knowledge of someone watching from without, the certainty there is someone who knows of your existence even in an abyss the colour of snow is often the only remedy to avoid madness.

Of course, some do not believe this man or woman exists, that the house is unoccupied or perhaps not even there.

After all, only the outline of it can be seen upon the hill and perhaps it is only one's delusion to mistake a singular knot of stone jutting from a larger stone for something else, somehow comforting.

For something human-made.

If any wished to know the truth all they need do is walk toward the hill.

None do.

Yet they all imagine they walked upon the hill and saw that man or woman there, observing them.

If any were asked what such a person was like each colonist would have a different answer.

The uncertainty of not knowing but believing they know is enough to keep them sane.

In the shadow of such a watcher the people go about their daily lives, greet each other, and another, as friend and lover, and in the night they are content.

Each imagines even in the observer's dreams they are glimpsed, and seen.

Whatever the truth it is enough that they believe and since their beliefs do no harm one to another for all are watched equally, and the watcher wears a trillion faces, depending on who and how it is seen . . .

I. A midnight episode

His name was Castrigran, taken from the name Kasyrgan.

He had arrived upon Akheilos and its shallow seas some days before and in his hand, he held the sacred text which he had taken from the library on Tranth.

Being the last of his order the priest had laboured all his days under the delusion of his persecutions, but here, here was the final freedom to scrawl his own morality across an entire world.

When he fled, he imagined some massive pursuit, a trillion eyes upon him, a trillion hands ready to clutch him home.

But none had been watching Castrigran that day.

It was no great mischief as to why.

The machines were occupied with their orgies and men were occupied with their machines and others with so many shades of gender and identity the poor man lost count.

The poor man.

But in his mind remained the grand pursuit, remembered

his liberation of the sacred text and before him, he imagined his chosen acolytes though they knew it not yet.

The sun had risen and was now burning him. The sacred text remained in its oaken box and the box remained in his grasp and he remained in the grasp of the shoreline and the shallow seas and the grasp of the shore remained in the hand of night.

By all rights, another hand should have held his form but death was only crouching nearby.

As if in play.

They were coming now. He could see that they were coming.

Long transparent bodies sinewed toward him, their organs coloured like ice mired with clay, each no longer than a small serpent and all blindly drawn to the man's legs like two great inverted spires in the water.

The oceans of Akheilos were only three feet deep and behind him, the shore was a dull-bright copper composed of jagged rock the consistency of martyred, broken bones.

Now the land was empty but soon it would be filled with life just as the waters were first peopled of fish and the next day the beasts of the fields came.

The serpentine brushed against him, soft spines making little painless rivulets into his flesh and then just as quickly departed. He stood like this for hours, allowing his martyrdom to become their feast.

Then the ordeal ended, he returned to the shore and waited for night to come.

He dreamed that night, imagining it afterwards a sign of prophecy.

He saw great heads brushing against the sky, hands reaching out to touch stars. He could see in outline a form much like himself striding a desert place he took to be the southernmost continent and in the wake of this form were smaller animals

following. Beasts of burden.

Awakening he sat up suddenly and noted it was now the second day. Already their labours had begun.

II. Venture to the interior

The creatures already were in labour, had been during the night. All life here had evolved a unique propensity, one which the
priest admired and had imagined to be his salvation.

Or rather theirs.

The creatures were already in labour and had been during the night.

By now across the shallow sea, small huts were formed. He could even see orchids beginning to grow, white petals interspersed with streaks of black.

He had left behind some orchid seeds upon the far shore and other seeds with them. Apple, maple, syardu were taken from Tranth or Saphra, themselves originally taken from Earth or Tlahicuile.

The creatures were now like small eels with small embryotic legs and arms. Insects had already begun to swim the sky on ice-stained wings.

And all of them were bearing some faction of his features.

The flies and wasps, the eels and ants crawling upon the ground, all of them had his blue eyes, the sad shape of his mouth.

It was the nature of Akheilos that the native species could take portions of other species into themselves evolving at an impossible rate as a result.

The first who discovered this feature had found themselves confronted two days after they arrived by a herd of deer which lacked faces and seemed also to lack bones.

One of the tiny burrowing pseudo-insects had consumed a

few flecks of human skin and during the next two days, (though a day on Akheilos obeyed no law of a terrestrial mind,) the emergence of the new species had come amongst the colonists, their faceless muzzles caressed in the hands of their unwitting creators.

Since there was no food which they could consume and since the island on which they stood could never support a colony of either race the humans had taken the herd with them and ordered that Akheilos be sealed. Those same animals still remained, given a fertile valley on an unknown planet occupied by no animal life which they could either consume or be consumed by, and allowed to evolve as they desired.

This was done because humanity desired above all to avoid further creations like this. They realized the terror of control and so relinquished it.

Except for Castrigran.

During the day he watched as the myriad strands of his ambition grew. The creatures changed from moment to moment, growing in proportion to his dimension. Soon they grew hands. Soon they grew bones. He could see the bones growing under the skins like ice crisscrossing along a frozen windowpane.

Skulls were shaping. And they were human skulls.

Still, he waited of course. They were not ready yet.

The book remained in its oaken box and he remained upon the farther shore. Waiting. They would need another day for him to come amongst them, claiming to be an angel of light.

It was such a simple thing.

Since they were his children, they would be compelled to obey him. Their blood was his, their marrow, their minds. Before he arrived they were nothing, blunt beasts, but soon they would become as human as he, and in being human they would be worthy of his . . . he struggled for the word.

Grace.

Other words came. Salvation. Mercy. Forgiveness.

He would be a good shepherd among them, guiding them, shaping them in the words of the Lord Maker and when they were ready, he would set them free to scour beyond Akheilos.

To scatter to the stars.

Saphra would be his first target.

Of all of them, Saphra had been the breaking point of his betrayal.

They were supposed to be like him after all.

On Saphra women and men did not touch, sexually or otherwise, directing their energies to other pursuits. Where most of humanity revelled in their machines the saphrans had turned away from this, focusing their minds on the limits of suppression.

The machines had allowed this since the saphrans interest in suppression had been itself a form of hedonism.

They were not seeking to deny themselves of pleasure but to find pleasure in other things. Madrigal was considered the planet of artists but Saphra was considered a planet of aesthetes. They had sought to sublimate desire for each other into desire for the world about them. They were known as experts in cultivating gardens and architecture.

Visiting Saphra was like visiting a broad sea of cathedrals spread over a whole ocean of greenery interspersed with shallow waters of a robin egg blue.

This was meant to have been his seat of power.

But they had rejected him.

They had expelled him from their cathedrals and in his hate and rage he had journeyed to Tranth and now to Akheilos.

But soon he would be returning.

He could even sometimes imagine that the far shore where his children played was itself Saphra and he could see again the silver spires of his forsaken home.

Across the robin egg blue waters of the shallow sea, he

could see his people continuing their evolution. Another day. It would simply be another day and they would be ready.

He would walk among them.

He would be a good god to them.

He stopped himself at that thought.

God? Surely not. He was merely to be the emissary of the light. All this he did for the Lord Maker and not himself.

All this he did.

Night came shortly after and he retired upon the sands.

Sleep came swiftly then.

Again, the dream.

Again, the outlined figure whose head touched the sky and whose hand reached out for the stars. Again, the beasts of burden in its wake, though he could see them more clearly now. They were like black crabs and others were sea stars.

They scoured over an endless desert and seemed to never cease.

He awoke.

It was the third day.

III. The dying dream of the tzitzimitl

He had imagined they would be fully human now and ripe for his intervention.

But the huts were gone.

Crossing the shallow waters with ease he stood in the new Eden his blood had made. There were still flowering plants and the insects flitted the air but the people were gone.

If he waited a few days more the insects would grow into new acolytes.

He walked a time, searching for wasp nests or hives, peeling back rotting logs looking for a few stray ants.

He found them quite easily but the longer he watched

them the more uneasy he became.

He stared at a wasp upon a flower and noted her features, his own feminized somewhat though still somehow his.

Upon a gold and black body adorned with ice-stained wings, he watched her work but as she stared at him he noticed indelibly a look of utterly human dread.

Of course.

Seen from her perspective he was a giant, his head struggling to touch the borders of the sky, his hands capable even of touching the stars.

His dream was her dream, their dream. Was not Akheilos a single organism, an interconnected mind and body whose component cells were a rough metaphor for cells of his own body?

And since he placed part of himself into them, he was now a part of this interconnection too, he the seed, the entire planet merely a womb.

The wasp rose and sped away just as the ant had done when she had noticed him peeling at the oaken sky of her world as had caterpillar children which rushed to the far side of certain trees at his approach.

But they would become his. All of them.

He had simply to wait and he would open the box and preach and give his sermons under alien trees so much like those of Tranth and Earth and far Saphra. He would teach them of the Lord Maker and lay forth his plans of war and they would listen, for were they not his children?

Was he not their G . . .

He was merely a servant of the Lord Maker.

But. If they misunderstood his meaning was that his fault?

He would not be able to correct them if they began to associate the Lord Maker with himself.

It was just about midday when he noticed the change.

He sat amongst the ruined huts for an hour then returned to his place of sanctuary. He ate a cold meal of some animal he caught in the waters when the wind began to pick up.

There was no wind on Akheilos though.

The planet had no massive weather systems. It was as mild at the poles as at the equator and was always summer here.

The wind continued. He noticed the waters then.

They were rippling. This too was impossible.

Though Akheilos had three moons, Saraisa, Erisana, and Ilxara, each was too small to cause any tide . . .

How did he know their names?

No humans had given the moons of Akheilos names but now he knew their names and names of far islands, of beasts of land and water, and even of the woman he had consumed.

Her name he knew.

The wind picked up harder than before.

He turned looking to the south and saw a shadow crossing the horizon. Followed by another and another.

The southernmost continent was the largest on Akheilos, a great desert that supported no life. Nothing could come from there.

But something was.

He wanted to call for his ship but his fingers refused to work and his voice was silenced.

His legs would not move.

The shadow kept growing in size, in its wake he could see smaller shadows slouching along the ground as if striding to Jerusalem to be born.

The shadow came to him then and he screamed.

He screamed but the silence deafened him as if it were a hurricane.

The beast towered over him, its outline much like his but its head seemed to touch the sky and its hand seemed able even to

touch the stars.

About its feet swarmed black clay crabs of corruption and zim zummim sea stars, each limb thicker than the man.

The hoary-headed beast stared down at him and its features seemed somehow *his own* . . .

Imagine a snail suddenly given a man's face but still obeying the laws of its ecology or a worm given all too human eyes or a faceless anemone forced to wear a human mouth and out of this stumble halfway into something almost approaching human.

Imagine the sheer terror for such a being to be thrust awkwardly into an alien's skin.

Now imagine that the alien is mad.

His eyes turned from the beast to the far shore then. He could see the people had returned but they were no longer his people.

The eel shape of them was gone. They were thinner now like the branches of certain trees. They had consumed other beings diluting his influence upon them step by step till now the bones had melted in their bodies.

And another change had come upon them as well.

Each was adorned with wings.

He watched them flee away, a great flood of wings assailing sky, watched them as they went, and saw along the horizon swam leviathans like great rounded whales, mouths agape to consume endless green spores drifting before them like martyrs would.

All of them were created in the night.

With them were long-necked birds whose bright plumes of feathers had no shape he could understand. It would be like explaining the colour of blood to a blind man, or martyrdom to a stone.

He watched them scatter north now as the beast still

towered over him as if waiting. The priest knew it was waiting for the last of them to leave, for there to be no trace of the man even in their memories.

Nor the memory of his death.

And death crouched low as if waiting too. He could feel it coming, caressing his cheek like some predatory animal about to sink her pale talons into his flesh.

The last of the creatures departed then.

He turned his eyes upward toward the nightmare standing before him.

The beast wearing his face plunged its hand downward, taking the man's whole body up and suspending him between sea and sky.

He felt it taking all of him then, each strand of his flesh, each sinew of his body, and when the body fell, he watched it fall seeing through eyes no longer his own.

In the dead silence of no music, he saw his body crumpled beside the oaken box where the holy text remained unopened and watched as the tide created by the giant's steps slowly dragged it out into the waters, to be rotted in its time.

Then in the final rapture of the act, Castrigran felt himself flowing along the beast's arm, through its chest, down into its legs, and up into its head.

He watched as it slowly turned back toward the south and when it arrived in the desert places it began to walk. It circled the sands as if walking a labyrinth, the beasts behind it always.

The planet had imprisoned him in this, knowing his intentions. Castrigran strode the earth as a god would then, circling back the way he came and then turning and circling back again. He had become a monastic virus suspended in a corrupted cell, or a parasite scratching at his own blood.

At times he would pause his turmoil and turn his eyes upward to night as if imagining some greater titan walking in her

gardens there, some star demon considering even galaxies little more than grains of sand upon an endless desert, herself walking to the edge of it then turning and walking back.

But all the time the beast continued on, oblivious of the man. He heard it making litanies all the time or singing hymns to a god it did not understand.

THE MALICE OF INVISIBLE THINGS

I. Love among the ruins, the graveyards of the world

I had taken a biplane out during the night.

The stone lands of Tsyoketseu spiralled in all directions but I knew where I was going.

I was going to meet my executioner, had designed her in fact, thinking out in careful detail what weapons to give her and what weapons I allowed myself.

At night Tsyoketseu lit up in a bioluminescent splendour and most of the invisible animals bled themselves into my awareness of them.

Long centipedes were seen crisscrossing the stone lands and in the air were immense moths the colour of the moon overhead.

During the day they were not only invisible but dreaming, perfectly hidden from all pursuits. Only night allowed them enough protection to reveal who they truly were.

And I likewise.

In the under-countries beneath the stony skin, I imagined the rest of my crew asleep, dreaming beside the raven people and their companions.

But though all the world was asleep I was condemned awake.

There.

There is the spot.

I set my biplane down and let it cruise to a stop. Exiting this scaffolding so like the bones of a strange insect I stood and waited for her to arrive.

In the midnight country having nothing else to do I looked

about the plateau into the low countries beyond.

More centipedes were gathering. I could see each segment of their bodies like individual golden shields burning together, locking slowly into a mass of ruins. At the head of each I could see the pincers icily slicing one against the other and could almost hear the razor sounds they made.

Ah.

Turning I perceived at last my murderer.

She was beautiful.

I had forgone the human shape and had instead decided upon a predatory animal, like a jaguar. She prowled toward me, one direction and then another, left and right, right and left, edging closer all the time.

I for my part drew my blade and waited by the plateau's edge, my feet firmly planted in the hard stone.

She pounced.

Time slowed just as the tlalacyl said it would.

The moon overhead I could see each feature of and the curl of her claws glinting like silver and her jaws stretched taunt, eyes like two burning coals, and she became the entire world then, her features filling up the moon, ground giving way to the breathing of her nonexistent lungs, the rhythm of a heart having no reason even to be . . .

She was upon me in a second and she bit deeply into my shoulder.

I for my part drew the blade up to the one spot in her anatomy susceptible to the blade. In a trillion possibilities the blow never came or never came right and my body lay upon that plateau to be devoured by those centipedes hours later while my murderer escaped to the wilderness, the flesh of my shoulder still burning in her jaws.

Instead, in this singularly right action out of all possibilities she lay upon the plateau likened unto death.

I breathed hard, allowing the wound to numb its pain through me, feeling each of the trillion deaths that might have come and stood atop the pinnacle of my survival, gazing down upon each of those ruined failures of lives, those broken endings sprawled like wreckages throughout the valleys below I picked up my murderer to carry her with me.

Then I got in my biplane and turned back the way I came.

II. Living in the cathedral of the air

I watched as the calginar woman drew off a portion of her arm and fed this to a tlalacyl child still clutching to her mother.

We were in the under city of Agetai Tiraign and tonight I was to go out into the wilderness.

To die.

The caverns spread out in an endless spider web which the tlalacyl warned us not to venture into lest we be lost.

This advice was heeded by all, except myself.

So, I had to be brought back after having spent half a day as the tlalacyl perceive a day in the darkened caverns of an unused part of Agetai Tiraign.

It was there having none to speak to and none to listen to that the magnitude of our situation caught at me.

This was the planet Tsyoketseu, home to an alien race and we the first to encounter them.

In some ways they were utterly human.

In others utterly beyond human reasoning.

The tlalacyl looked human save the colour of their eyes and had feathers for hair. They evolved on a nearly dead planet and so developed a culture in reverence of death, as vultures would.

Hence the executioner I was going to create several hours in the future.

Having nothing to do except wait in the dark I pondered this, listening only to the sound of my own voice for what seemed eternity.

In that dark cavern there was only the statues of the dead to talk with so this was what I did, speaking to statues who had feathers instead of hair, as vultures would, wondering aloud their evolution and that of the calginar.

The tlalacyl revered cowardice, loathed possessions, and considered love to be abhorred.

But to them "bravery" was attacking from a distance, "possessions" were weapons more advanced than a blade, and "love" was the idea of two tlalacyl bound together for all time.

Instead, there was another word they used, alisyraisthene, which referred to their companionship with the calginar.

The calginar themselves seemed a race of aphids, green-skinned women whose bodies could be cut and healed in mere seconds.

The tlalacyl and calginar had evolved together for millions of years, two species as unlike each other as they were bound together and this word alisyraisthene referred only to that bond.

By the end I was repeating and reciting it like a litany when they found me, slamming my fist into the stone face of a man who had died ten thousand years before the human race was born.

Carried out into the light of the living city the calginar woman was cutting a portion off her arm, feeding it to the tlalacyl child, and I desiring . . .

"Are you alright," my guide asked, "is there anything we can do for you?"

I mentioned the duel to the death.

She obliged.

III. Chameleon of the wastelands

Great reefs of transparent bodies were seen at night.

They seemed like jellyfish but were infinitely more massive and they each occupied the sky. We had only arrived days earlier and had discovered this new alien race.

The tlalacyl woman who stood next to me explained the ecology beyond.

What I took to be jellyfish they had another name for. These predators could only be seen at night like most of the creatures on Tsyoketseu.

Living in an invisible ecology meant the tlalacyl and calginar built their cities underground, great domed settlements designed to keep out centipedes, jellyfish, or razor tongues.

Despite the absurdity of the situation no conflict had come.

A ship had arrived from another planet and the tlalacyl far from panicking had taken the entire situation in hand as if it were another day.

The woman before me, a stranger just a day before, held no more fear of me than I would a child of theirs.

Partly this was because of the nature of their world.

Stepping upon the surface was an invitation to death meaning any who did so did so with the full expectations of rounding their lives with sorrow. And what was the sky if not a further extension of the ground?

If we were willing to exist so far out and yet show no fear in this then we were as they were, gifted survivors.

And therefore kin.

But there was another reason.

As we watched the jellyfish like translucent child-moons drifting in the distance I saw a tlalacyl man fighting with another.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"He is fighting his shadow," she explained.

And then she explained further.

Though we assumed the tlalacyl lacked technology this was far from the truth. Technologically they had equivalent machines to what humanity had a century ago, only difference being they seldom used them here, instead relegated to the deepest corners of the planet. The peoples we encountered so near the surface were so near because they were on the edge of the great metropolises, just as a small village would be on the edge of a great city.

What had this to do with the duel we were seeing?

Because so few tlalacyl had to face death anymore in the old ways there remained a fear of losing connection to what was.

To prevent this in the lowest sections of the planet could be procured a machine tailored to the desires of the host. This would be programmed with a singular desire to kill its own creator and both then be allowed upon the surface for a time.

The ritual was seen as a form of cleansing, a return to form, and though rare it still had its adherent admirers. We watched a time and saw one figure fall, never certain if the victor had been flesh or wire.

Afterward, we retired to the doors into the sand and from there returned to the city just as the sun was about to rise.

IV. The lindwyrm prince

The calginar woman is giving birth.

In a stone room surrounded by tlalacyl she is giving birth. If human it would be an agonizing process but she lacks bones and the infant is only an egg the size of a small fist.

The tlalacyl placed this egg with a clutch of others in a small enslave by the far wall. Thermal vents allow that particular wall to be continuously warm.

The room is but one chamber of several and the woman is

laying upon a nest of soft stones, a pseudo-clay which lacks stone's rigidity but unlike clay retains its shape.

Mostly.

As the tlalacyl midwife is speaking to the calginar something important has happened.

Ah.

My guide explains that this egg is the first male calginar born in this generation.

Like aphids for many generations, males do not exist and reproduction is an asexual act, producing mirror-daughters, one identical to the last.

Now though a generation of males will be born too, leading to the sexual emergence of the calginar again.

Since the word they have for love refers only between calginar and tlalacyl I ask my guide to explain what this will mean.

Will this new generation act differently? Will they understand concepts like love or other ideas of humanity?

"Life is always changing," my guide says, "and what makes you believe coming here will change only us?"

But I answer that I find it hard to believe a human being can ever be changed along the trajectory of an alien mind.

THE INFINITE ISLES

I. Lord ocean

There is a stretch of islands going on forever.

The islands take various shapes though most often I imagine them as lush and green.

Have you ever seen the greenest shade possible for a leaf to have? At a certain point, it no longer looks real but bleeds into something else, something *older*, something preexisting consciousness.

That is the colour the islands take the longer I stare at them.

Where I stand now is both on one of the islands and on all of them, for I can see both everywhere and all where I have been.

The labyrinthine path from one island to the last creates a curling, spiralling cacophony, and more than once I've turned to look fully upon an island, seeing myself there staring back at me.

The seisara, in being native to Aryulmne, have no such difficulties of perception.

But then the reason I am here is because I am . . . unwell.

II. The more you travel the road
the shorter it is

I could tell you about my sickness but to an extent I do not know the nature of it.

It is like perceiving a boulder in a still pond, this black expanse inwardly thrust into my mind, and since all is still the weight remains, river of myself waiting for some flow to free me from standing over it and allow the sickness to retreat backward from my present to become memory.

I first experienced this on Balgyrir.

I was walking in a field colour of amber and there flitted above me the cries of birds.

I remember this distinctly though at the time could see no birds in the air, nor wings, nor even the sound of wings.

Just the cry of some raven-thing.

The sounds of these cries continued often afterward, following me from the fields to the cities.

At certain times I would hear them again, often at a point of another's death and sometimes, but only sometimes, would see a wing of something peering over them.

Once though I saw the face of the thing . . .

My sickness had no cure upon Balgyrir.

I always knew this so in the morning of a summer day I took ship and departed, following the cry of a bird I could never see.

I passed beyond the rim of human space out into the wilderness of stars, into the void uncharted, guided by my sickness to be cured of it.

Eventually, I arrived upon Aryulmne.

There I encountered the seisara.

Unless one has seen them it is impossible to describe them.

At first you are presented with a skin of grey stretched taunt before your eyes. These waves of parchment walk across the isles and even across the waters, oblivious of yourself.

This skin will then coalesce once it has taken eye of you, break down to whatever shape you are while remaining incomplete, sans eye, sans mouth, sans any feature till you are presented by a blank sheet of a faceless face, otherwise mirroring your own self.

And writhing about this is the sairoposa.

It is a long serpentine labyrinth of a body coiling about the blank flesh and longer you stare at it the more it reveals of itself till you cannot count the segments of its body as if staring at

infinity herself.

The seisara speak to these serpents of memory constantly for each of them is not an animal but a sea of tomes, books comprising elements of the creature's skin.

They read these beasts, strumming handless hands across the bodies and so are presented with the past, allowing one to stand a thousand years before, two, a hundred, and through their senses they know what has been.

The sairoposa themselves routinely depart from their hosts and drown themselves in drowning pools of memory which are placed at various sanctuaries upon the isles. At these pools of memory, the tomes disperse and scatter, copying themselves like viruses into the bodies of each so that no knowledge will escape them in its time.

Then they return and the seisara continue their labours.

This was the world I found myself upon called to by birdsong, driven as unto madness by the whole.

And upon my arrival, a physician was selected to treat the patient which I was.

III. Brother to disease

At first, I didn't understand this.

I was simply followed by a parchment skin looking like myself though grey as a winter sky. About it sailed the sairoposa which turned unseeing eyes to me once or twice.

Though I was a stranger here the seisara neither harmed me nor denied me. I was free to wander as they wandered and I was free to touch the sairoposa and their pools . . . but that came later.

Aryulmne is a world of islands.

I cannot stress this detail enough.

There is ocean and there are islands and the islands are

without number due to the very nature of the seisara.

Since each of them exists in both past and present each island itself is a multitude. Is legion. One can walk across yesterday or last year as easily as today and yet because yesterday differs an entirely "new" world is created or recreated, meaning the longer one stares the more infinities pile up.

I saw a thousand years ago occupying the skin of an island and on another, it was only the previous day. But now and then the song persisted and once or twice I caught the black wing of something crouching near to where I lay.

That first day upon Aryulmne and its shimmering isles, I unperceiving why they shimmered so, I thought I reached the shores of sanity and as night fell, I slept brokenly.

In dreams, my physician continued to tend to me.

IV. World of terraces

In dreams, islands were inversed.

As I slept the seisara allowed me into their dreamscape just as that first day they had allowed me to see the country of yesterday.

I saw the islands inversed as if I were staring upward into them, as if sky and sea had twisted their roles.

And these islands I saw were altered another way.

This was tomorrow, or potential tomorrows.

I saw gods in embryo. I saw the treachery of names. Having reached the threshold of my understanding I was pushed through into a further blackness.

I screamed.

There is only one yesterday but there are trillions of tomorrows.

In this dreamscape their idle fantasies became real.

Have you ever seen a nightmare suddenly gifted of

consciousness?

I have.

Worse still an alien nightmare.

But somehow, I heard him even then, guiding me.

My physician.

In the language of dreams, I saw myself or rather my features he wore in that second realm.

He spoke words I could not understand but somehow knowing he spoke using my voice it comforted me.

I awoke.

This was the first/thousandth day. During the night time had slipped away and being bonded to one of them, watching the writhing coils of a sairoposa about my left arm I was given to understand day and night as I knew them were no more.

From there life on Aryulmne continued backward the further I stared ahead.

I saw myself arriving. I saw myself on that first day which felt like forever ago.

I saw myself as a second in my past.

Only in dreams could I see ahead.

Still, the cry persisted though, in waking and in dreams.

I could not know what it meant, the boulder in the still stream pressing still upon me.

V. The king of the black isles

Finally, one night my physician tossed me ahead.

He showed me myself cured.

He showed me taking my vessel and returning the way I came. I passed the wilderness of stars, reached Balgyrir again, and settled back into my life.

Died.

Further ahead he showed me, first one century, then

another.

I saw my people change.

The balgyrians of my home softly, slowly evolved.

They began to lose their mouths then their eyes became a deep cat's eye yellow.

Their skin took on colours I had no name for.

And each of them imagined themselves as a god in embryo.

My physician showed me the future of my world and how my people would imagine all things to be but gods about to be.

They also began to believe in the treachery of names, that they couldn't understand a thing by naming it. Having no speech made this philosophy easier.

These future souls came from me and mine. I was their yesterday and there can only be one yesterday but ahead their lives were potential reality. But it need not be this way.

I had in that dream the power to end all things.

The cry uttered was uttered by the last of them capable of speech, passing through the centuries, reaching me.

I saw her then like some shadow's wing, her face as human as my own though all else was alien as the seisara. She had seen this yesterday I occupied, and in her terror cried out.

All I needed to do to allow her to be was be cured of the idea I had ever heard her cry.

If I ignored that sound, pretended it did not exist then all would be well for them. But if I remained here seeking further aid then she would vanish like snow upon a fire and the following centuries would never exist.

There would be others to take their places, including the woman whose cry had been my sickness all this time.

Pausing there upon that inverted island I had to choose.

I chose.

In the logic of sleep, I divided myself cleanly in half. In the

morning a portion of the man I was would awaken, take his vessel, and depart.

But the other portion would remain here in the drowning pools of memory, never forgetting nor allowing myself to forget.

This choice my physician did not comment on but I saw that the future to come remained intact.

And afterward, having no body anymore I looked across the waters at my yesterdays, half-content and half-afraid, watching the plume of my ship depart back across the wilderness of stars and my only thought to the maker of my sickness who in her terror had cried out causing all my misery, was this.

I'd be you if I could.

THE BRIGHT WORLD COME

I. The chrysalis shard

I awoke into consciousness before the time of suns.

In the beginning was only blackness and the coalescing clouds of nebulae. There was no sound in this primordial emptiness, nor touch, nor sight.

I perceived myself sightlessly for untold eternities, aware only of myself.

In time though I longed for my isolation to end.

So, I crafted my sibling-daughters.

From out of me I took my own flesh, though the word "flesh" has no meaning at a time before the universe's laws solidified.

Shaped them sightlessly, imbuing them with the element of myself, divesting myself into two and then three, and of those two I gave name.

But having no voice the name of them cannot be understood unless one has never needed voice, that invisible language precluding conscious thought.

We together communed one onto another, slipping seamlessly from form to form, mind to mind, I knowing the distinction of her and she the distinction of I, and if I turned and found myself eluded by another so like her, I knew it was not she but her sister-mother.

I suppose you could imagine us happy for a time, or content, but words like these have no meaning to immortals.

Contentment can only exist predicated upon the blade of uncertainty, the abyss-fear of experiencing the absence of itself.

To immortals since fears cannot be so too can contentment never come.

But we were still happy in our way.

Time having no meaning we waited and watched the first stars be born, then the first galaxies. The entire universe was but an empty garden we strode across and our forms gave birth to planets and suns, rounded shapes of ourselves echoing into the foundations of the universe, giving rise to the law of planetary formation.

Having crossed eternity, we wandered back the way we came, finding ourselves staring back at us though these were but dead husks, wraiths pretending our form, having no awareness of themselves.

These marionette ghosts we shook and touched and prodded as one would the unhandsome corpse of a man you knew, struggling to hope against hope some semblance of life remained within him but finding no such fire we despaired.

It is a curious taste, despair.

I think this was the very first sensation of taste I ever knew, my mouth evolving from the knowledge of it, my throat evolving from the knowledge of that.

And theirs as well.

After this, we went hunting for the living if the living could be found.

You can have no comprehension of the emptiness of a universe if you are seeking to find the fire of life within it. Life is a child of mayflies, flittering here and gone, sprawling across one world, perishing, arriving at another, perishing, arriving at another, and perishing again.

We despaired further the longer we looked, our eyes evolving in concert with our despair.

And then I found them.

There was a star about to die. Have you ever heard the music of a star as it is dying? It is not like any mere thunder or the roil of waves or the scream of the high gods knowing they are no longer worshipped. It is an entity unto itself as if the scream were

itself a living thing, devoured and devouring by its being and its passing, and this I listened to, transfixed as unto the hour of its execution.

Approaching I saw upon the collapsing pyre the arxen, born crystalline, appearing as spiders though they came long before the first arachnids were ever born.

Their cry mingled with the cry of their dying sun and I for the first time in forever took pity upon another.

I carried them up, silver strands and threads drifting from my handless hand, and deposited them carefully across the body of myself.

The jagged spires and black continents of my skin they took possession of and for the first time I touched intimately the skin of another living thing.

It was an intimacy I dare never forget.

Then my sibling-daughters and I watched as the star blackened in our gaze and fell, collapsing to a blacker pit from which light itself could not escape.

Idly I picked the dead husk up and examined it, feeling the gravity pulling at me but this was only obedient to the laws of the universe and I preceded all such laws.

I was above such petty things.

Then I placed it back upon its mantle and allowed the pulsing beast to howl impotently, consuming the light passing through and into it as we departed again the way we came.

II. The traitor's gate

I do not know how much time passed after that.

The arxen built their nests from the jagged ruins of my flesh and crafted the great spire threads which drifted from their bodies becoming mosaics, existing only in flickering of time.

While I was eternal.

Eventually, only the genius of them was left, each previous iteration left lingering some portion of their minds written in thread. I loved them I knew in the passing of them, I who had existed since before the coming of fire or stone or wheel.

I visited each as they fell or if I was diverted elsewhere a daughter-sibling took the shroud of my purpose and placed her assignation upon them.

I was death to them or the emissary before death, guardian of the traitor's gate who stood before the gallows of chance.

I comforted them knowing their fate could never be my own.

Then, how long the passing of it was I do not know, I beheld *her.*

Hers was no song but cacophony.

Imagine a trillion voices rising, falling, rising, disjointed madnesses screaming at the void, knowing all was extinguishing and being extinguished, despairing at the passing of herself.

I understood such fears though could not feel them as intimately as she.

Beside her lay the red seep of a second world and other voices streaming into void.

We three settled there, I listening, uncertain what to do.

I heard their histories and occasionally walked among them.

The red seep was occupied of creatures calling themselves soren and in their company, I was as they were, my skin shifting, I rising eldritchlike into sand whale and sky-whale, I collapsing to forms of men and women, dwelling and listening to them in their basalt cities, watching as each in their turn became sand whale and sky-whale, the mind of them corrupted in their old age.

And I wandered along the forest paths beneath grey trees, a faceless invertebrate deer pretending myself another cog in the machinery, watching as each further cog was carried silently into

the eternal night without end.

And in time I resolved that which I must do.

Carefully I laid into the mind of she whose body was but the shell of the endless grey trees and grey grass and grey soil the thought of rising on iridescent wing.

So, I put into the minds of those of the red seep the idea of the coming of something alien and familiar.

Then I waited and allowed the thing to be.

I saw the spores of her rising into the ether, drifting along the basalt cities, taking possession of their legion. And I saw the soren stepping into the labyrinthine flesh of themselves, sealing the infections away, preventing them from possessing and marionettelike controlling them.

So, communion came to H'xaelis and Viridios, shaped by the actions of one they neither knew nor understood.

Time passed then.

The great shell of her body was suffused of the bodies of sand whale and sky whale in embryo and so ceased the decay. Given this renaissance the parasite world outstretched her hand, acting in ways I lacked imagination and logic to act.

She birthed her daughters within her, spores capable of traversing where I could not and the young girl left scattered across stars and planets her infinite eye.

She saw then everything, even that which I could not have imagined ever seeing. Out of this I first learned regret.

I having existed since before the universe's laws perceived all strangers comparable to myself. In comparing demons, I knew myself as a singular devil and the arxen who called the skin of my body home I knew as alien to myself as I was alien to the Over Mind.

So, I had no fear of her or them nor did I fear anything.

Yet when she extended her hand and eye outward what did she perceive? She perceived not only life as it was, not only

the primordial of their infinite seas but things to come whose shape was foreign to either she or I or those of the red seep.

She sought to end the nightmares of them before they ever came and through the influence of her infinite eye she sought to throw forth all that she was, disrupting their future paths.

To end them.

It was then my sibling-daughters and I acted, pouring ourselves lengthwise into the girl.

With us went the soren who acted as her guardian. We drew forth her force and diminished her before she could end all life before it came.

I said a final farewell to the arxen and those soren who knew they would bid final farewell to their countrymen and I embracing her threw us all into a space of dead stars and worlds.

Knowing never again would I hold creation in my hand.

III. Floating around in a sea of uncertainty

The planet we fell against had no life upon it, instead composed of the pure fire of oblivion.

The soren had imprisoned her bodily in the cage of herself, I likewise imprisoned, holding her at bay. They began to build a citadel upon the southernmost shore, I left lingering and flickering along her consciousness, whispering to her always the way not to be.

Behind me, my sibling-daughters remained left to care for the spider children I'd left behind, heirs not of my blood but of my intent.

And I waited, knowing forever to be but an hour and I suspended along the consciousness of it.

The planet cooled.

The soren took up their post, their names forgotten and replaced. The girl became a dreaming god, I the devil in her

dream.

It was an equal trade I think, I existed before her, I was the maker of her, I condemned to prevent her in the ending of things.

I waited.

How long is eternity to an immortal? Time has no meaning to us. Only loss. So, I waited, despaired, found my own contentment, and despaired again.

The nightmares of the future she gave birth to in her stead. In the amniotic seas the seeds of men she lay.

Their number, their faces, and their lives hold no true account save in my memory of them. Their litany and the litany of them is the penance I forced myself to wear.

Time passed. World cooled, warmed, cooled. Far-frozen moons took up the mantle of life and great acidic wastes gave birth to moth daughters and scorpion women and cicada girls.

They perished and I remembered.

They perished and we lingered on.

Once, more than once allowed myself to escape, go on walkabout through worlds, my eye still ever watchful upon the dreaming god.

I'd wed. I'd sire children with one race or another. I'd listen to my wife, my husband, and allow myself the luxury of pretending old age could take me.

I'd die.

In dying I would return into the prison skull of the dreaming god and be left lingering for a time I'd eventually return as another shape of man, another form of woman.

Then came the time when she awoke . . .

IV. Thorn in her flesh

After Gadaj Dajal returned, the dreaming god came to occupy again the shell of her former self, her desires shed as a

chrysalis shed from the insect who bore it I was at a loss at what to do.

My purpose having finished I perceived the long corridor of forever before me.

I could return to the shell of my own body, be reunited with my sibling-daughters and the spider children I had known.

This I did not do.

Instead, I took up the mask of a young girl as the Over Mind had been, and went crossing worlds a time, pretending myself the villain.

I made an art at the failure of evil.

I let fall the cry I was a murderer, a monster, a demon, but the mocking tones I left meant none believed me. I laid bare my confession but appeared a young girl of only ten and no one could believe I had been an infinite creature spawned from void.

I visited Tranth and Balgyrir and let stop all who paused the sound of my confession.

None believed of course.

It was good that none believed.

Eventually, I did not believe it myself.

Eventually having spent forever searching and failing to arrive at any place I put all I was into a girl no older than ten, secured and separated all I had been, and being now only this girl . . . lived.

I aged. I fell in love a final time.

I bore the last children I would ever bear, myself now wearing the face of Gadaj Dajal, the daughter I had unwittingly created as a monster meant to destroy a future I would never see.

Upon my death bed at this moment only now do I recall all I was and am, giving myself fully the onrush of an eternity denied me and in being denied facing the freedom that I will not see.

The freedom of my great-granddaughter's face who is not as yet conceived . . .

THE BLACK ROSE

I. Arsaid

In the end, you'd find etched on walls the same story over and over again. On Tranth before the final metamorphosis from human to future human, some wrote on white stones various crude figures or full murals depicting life before its end.

On Europa in ice cities which once had touched the distant sun but now were closed in the hooded coils of cold would be found various allegories.

The argilylisgiria once had a proud tradition of storytelling and those last etched deeply into the ice their most famous stories of tluenixa ice lords, beasts lacking speech who fed through the bleeding palms of their hands, and even of Zauul Xhualia, lost city which lay to the dark south, where slept the dreaming god.

Or so the stories said.

On cave walls occupied by Neanderthals you'd find similar carvings, often showing animals but just as likely things not likely to exist. Most such images faded by the time another pair of eyes set eyes upon them.

But one image imbedded in the background always remained though none were made aware of it.

II. Into the black briar

There is placed on every drawing ever made by human hand a black rose. It is impossible to see and the artist does not know they are doing it.

Under eaves or just above doors of certain cathedrals or sprawled along a child's hand making a picture of her family or enveloped in some artistic scenery of golden grass, curled along the canvas by a master's hand, lay the same black rose.

One could spend lifetimes searching for it but once found the mind is forced to forget, a trick of she who sleeps, confounding logic of a dream that even if one is made aware of it our senses deceive us and so we are lost again.

This black rose is written in the acts of each of us and is the singular thread she wove as she fell against the black shores of Earth. It was the final conscious thought of her seeing the spiralling petals of oblivion, burning coals of a planet that had never touched life or the living before she fell.

We act without knowing we are acting, as dreams would.

III. In a titan's garden

To Tarhenisja humans came, where razor-trees walked, orchid-tigers prowled and grasses sang neath tread of grass-hyenas.

Into this humanity came.

Little colonies of wasps were there as well.

At first, there seemed no change but evolution is a slow mistress. Over thousands of years, humanity came into contact closer and closer with the wasps till there was no point where humanity ended and they began.

At first, the wasps moved into human habitations making small paper nests in the crooked places of certain eaves.

Then one or two colonies began to interact more closely, seeking what their hosts desired.

Companionship.

The wasps acted as subtle matchmakers finding lovers for their owners, carefully, invisibly leading two to find each other, making small labyrinths of threads that could neither be touched nor seen nor felt but still intimately influenced them.

These subtle actions changed though over time.

You know certain insects mimic either their prey or those

they prey upon, carnivorous caterpillars mocking snakes or moths whose wings have the eyes of animals written on them.

The wasps so too changed.

One day of no seeming importance a young girl appears who wasn't there the day before. She appears utterly human. Her skin is soft, her eyes flicker as a human's do in light. She smiles.

She smiles.

You'd find women suddenly emerging out of nothing striding city streets canvas in hand and if one spoke to them they'd answer back the same.

Of course, humanity changed in that time too.

Some humans had grown wings ice-stained upon their backs and others had eyes the shape and brilliancy of a bright green jewel metallically reflecting the sun.

Eventually, it was realized these new people were the insects themselves, their bodies but the colonies they occupied and if you cut them out would bleed a wasp or two which would then return the way she came.

But after a few generations, the insects had so perfected their mimicry that even cutting them would reveal nothing except an approximation of human blood.

So, here is the situation. Humanity has changed and is no longer merely human, sharing space with individuals who appear identical to themselves, act in the selfsame ways, speak identically, and pretend even in their dreams to be human.

How can you tell the two apart? At what point can you fathom out the answer?

When the insects draw, they reveal no black rose embroidered in their craft, but since humans cannot perceive the test they are utterly unaware of it.

In all ways that matter there is no difference between the two save in their origins.

Eventually, humanity perishes, perhaps by plague or

storm or suicide, and one by one they do depart leaving their mirror replicas behind until at the end Tarhenisja is occupied again only by insects and orchid-tigers as they prowl but the insects are not aware that this is their native home. To them, their origins lay elsewhere in a lost paradise once known as Earth.

And at that time if one was made aware of it one would find etched on portraits and canvases and descending from the doorways of their homes the invisible black roses written there.

And after a time, they even lose their wings again . . .

IV. Voices from the edge

Far beyond known worlds new life springs, emerging from the black gardens of oblivion. The sheer magnitude of life never ceases but flows and each unique form would need the number of pages as stars written in the sky to describe them.

Sometimes would evolve beings much like ourselves whose languages, whose thoughts, whose dreams are still alien enough that true communion would be impossible.

These beings in their time would scatter forth, sometimes even arriving at the ruins of the old Earth.

They'd scour the burnt metropolises and walk amongst the floors of the great citadel where the dreaming god once lay.

And always would they ask among themselves the same question.

Why had these beings written again and again the same pattern of a flower, written in stone and sand? What had compelled them to devote themselves to this singular image so?

But of course, if our paths and theirs had crossed and they asked this of us we would have merely stood in wonder and asked them what they meant.

For like any pursuit of the living that we do, like any purpose our aimless lives are driven to, how can we answer that?

Ghost Stories

"I have an expedition for the
life of the unknown future."
Habib Kilisli

Premise

What if when a person dies, they do not go to some mystical after-land in some non-defined place but instead awaken or are born on another planet, either subtly changed or no longer human?

What if further, all other planets are the afterlives of human beings, each the repository of someone's soul?

And what if further some of those who perish there arrive here transformed into human beings, and other forms of life?

Corollary: what happens when humanity begins exploring these various worlds and what happens when the denizens of those worlds begin to explore the Earth?

THE DEVIOUS MOTHS

In the summertime one noticed moths flying the air, small-bodied black and grey wings floating from flower to flower, never resting.

At first, when children mentioned them, their parents were not concerned. Children say foolish things and back then it was believed a child was little more than a slave.

Or a woman.

Of course, this was not the whole of the world. It was a very small country and the peoples of this land seldom ventured beyond their borders.

They knew nothing of other worlds.

But children kept mentioning, even after being beaten, of the strange moths flittering summer night skies.

They claimed the moths had human eyes.

In those days when most of humanity escaped among suns certain enclaves remained, obsessive cults convinced that to leave was to die, to lose one's humanity as *they* defined it.

Thus, even if they had heard of other life-bearing worlds they wouldn't have believed it.

The country was ruled by twelve men, each one claiming inspiration from some ancient book few read anymore.

Above all of them was their king, though he was not called a king.

He was called something else, something that began with the letter M.

The country had resisted the rest of the world, protected by mountains to the north and mountains to the south and the mountains to the east, and . . . you get the idea. In this secluded little half-world women had been deemed less than men, children less than women, and the truth less than both.

And this state of affairs had existed for a generation.

Yet in the summertime of a very special summer moths began to appear. They swarmed subtly the broad flat fields, drinking of wine a ruby dye . . . a poetic conceit. In truth, they drank of flowers and in return, the shuffling of their wings sounded just like whispering.

A woman, her eye bloodied, would hear moths talking one to another, calling her daughter and asking what became of her.

In dim hallways, children would bring the moths in, creatures that obediently stayed in the small children's hands even as they relaxed their grasps. Oftentimes the moths would crawl to their ears and children would imagine they heard words like their grandmothers used, their tones of voice, their inflections.

Then the spiders came.

One day one of the twelve went to his morning rape, his victim a twelve-year-old girl. She was tied to a post in the yard and he undressed, she whimpering, the sun warm, a tree behind him and dangling from the tree a swing she would be allowed to use after he was done with her.

Then a prick, and a scream.

The prick however was not him, nor was it his.

There was a needle-sharp fire and glancing down he saw a brown-bodied spider, her fangs bursting into his skin. He screamed, not merely because of the pain, but because of the eyes.

The eyes were human.

The same human eyes his wife once had before he had put her away and buried her beside that very tree behind him.

Then he staggered and fell, his hand reaching impulsively for the swing his daughter would have been allowed to use.

After this the sound of a legion of wings as the binding slowly devoured a strand at a time. Later the girl was led away and spiders came singing through the grass and carefully, ever so carefully dragged him up the trunk of the tree and let him hang, his body their new demesne, his veins their new labyrinthine

dominion.

By day's end, each spider had laid a multitude of eggs in him. By the following day, his body ceased to exist and even the bones were drunk dry and turned to grains of sand.

One down. Twelve to go, something said, as it went singing through the grass . . .

They took their time, those devious moths and spiders and each day they changed. After the second's death, several witnesses watched as they imagined the moths had human hands, small pale dripping pieces of flesh hanging from their front legs.

The third perished screaming in his pool drowning in a sea of silk as spiders whispered now with an almost human tongue . . .

The fourth barricaded himself in a steel room and died due to asphyxiation. The air vents were riddled with black and grey wings and white silk.

None mourned any of these men.

Women were disappearing as well. Children with them.

It was an impossible exodus.

And yet somehow none ever noticed it.

For in the fields, the same numbers worked, at night those strong men turned to the cages where their wives were kept and seemed to notice them there, yet by morning they were gone.

Or had they ever been there at all?

By the last day of the country's history, the surviving men retreated to a palace impossible to gain entry by.

Their leader sat at his throne and bid them enter, those lustful little creatures too foolish to think. Women, of course, he meant. He meant women.

They came, beautiful pale bodies with hair like dark silk. He'd never seen such women before dancing nakedly before the men and then with a clap of his hands he bid them come, and

service them.

The palace room was white and broad with guards placed every ten feet and the remaining leaders of the nation sat upon their thrones in a circle and the women came and bent down . . . and the pain seared them like an acid cancer-wise.

They rose their heads upward from between the men's knees smiling blood, their teeth like razor wire.

The leader looked at his guards and realized they were not moving.

They would never move again.

And all the time in the broad fields the 'women' kept working, women with small vestigial wings upon their backs, with needle-fine teeth singing in their mouths, and at just the right command all those workers dissolved away, becoming what they were again, devious moths and spiders drowning along tall grass while their sisters desiccated those who had turned their daughters and granddaughters and grandsons to beasts of burden, or worse.

And each dying servant of themselves awoke to find themselves upon white fields which swam forever, each of them immobile as a statue. For this is what they were, grey little bodies suspended forever before flowers and moths and spiders spinning their webs in the undergrowth of pale winter-white hills.

But ever so slowly their stony flesh began to give way, would give away in a century or two, and in their metamorphosis might become anything. A spider, a moth, or even what they hated most.

A woman.

They might be a woman awakening upon Earth a century after when even their names were lost and forgotten, even to themselves.

And all the time in the living lands the dead took off their garments of being human, sang a final song, and bled across the

sky, noticed by no one except a small child or two.

But one thing would never be forgotten.

The names of their children, and grandchildren, and their children after them. These would remain seemingly into the end of time . . .

IF SEX IS LANGUAGE
WHAT IS SILENCE THEN?

They met first time somewhere on the old Earth, he young as she, she old as he, and for whatever reason they fell in love.

Hard to explain I suppose. Was it his eyes, hers? Their banter, the subtle way he said hello or something unusual she did in bed or out of bed or when she discussed politics or religion, mocking one or the other or both, or was it nothing at all?

Was it merely some undefined fate impossible to explain?

Let us give them fifty years together and then death separates.

Their children gather, funeral prepared, he is mourning or she, I haven't decided yet who died, followed by the slow mourning, grief staining days like nicotine and ash.

Then the other follows.

Ah, but the story does not end.

They arrive somewhere else, another world. Perhaps Gibalba, or failing this Argilistra, or perhaps Shayal Inrialith, or Erasigiel. They are born and meet again. Their bodies are changed of course. In some worlds, gender no longer exists but he is there, she likewise, and they meet again.

Perhaps they are born a single composite creature, outracing gravity's myriad storms.

Perhaps they are embedded in bodies of plants, writhing serpentine things in jungles turning veins into a labyrinth for them to wander in together.

Perhaps they are cannibals, one devouring the other, taking onto themself the portion of their once-beloved. Or not.

The stars are as infinite as the fates of men and even after five centuries of exploration the true number of dominions the dead are gathered to have not been fully found.

It hardly matters though.

They fell in love as human beings and now dwell in alien bodies when they meet again and again and sometimes those bodies have no sex behind them, no lovemaking nor passionate embraces, and sometimes they have neither arms nor limbs nor anything, a mere sentient virus adrift in dark vacuums of foreign flesh which they control as easily as our brains control our own.

And what is left then?

Imagine a thousand lifetimes, meeting and parting and meeting, man and woman, woman and man, neither, both, embracing in some lifetimes and never capable in others, and yet the one constancy is their love for one another in jungle labyrinth and on the plains of Abanthon, looking like worms striding their thrones in the last days of a dying water-starved world or existing as small rodentlike things, mere cogs in mental bodies of the titan drifting below the alien earth all of them inhabit.

Yet never in all of a thousand lifetimes do they part, never do they desire at the end to leave or find their bitter tears, their recriminations. Instead, they seek one another forever even to the end of time, speaking this language of desire even in flesh incapable of such a thing.

Leading of course to the title at the first of this, to the question I asked when I first watched each of them in their thousand lives, noticing myself alone, wondering again and again at the failure in myself in all an infinite myriad days and ways, wondering at the question they seemingly found the answer to.

If love is language, what is silence then?

Incest was the biggest concern at first.

Many of the people of Erasigiel could have been our forebears. I had the terrible fear more than once that the young woman sitting across from me was a dead relative, an aunt who passed, someone older, a grandmother, or a great-grandmother.

That was the biggest fear, at first.

In appearance of course they do not look human. Golden-skinned with golden catlike eyes, small lines of barely perceptible fur crossing along the sides of their arms, length of their legs, no other fur besides this and the rough short bristles upon their heads.

Could never imagine it as hair. Only fur.

The women here took such a special interest in us.

A loving interest.

Our second biggest concern.

We were merchants, our job was to take goods from world to world. We moved forests from Shayal to Earth or great blocks of pure ice to lands of desert knowing the ice could never melt but only cool entire continents to winter.

Here though we assumed our greatest point of trade would be incense. They had a love of ginger, of saffron. Seemed almost narcotic to them.

But no.

We were what we traded most.

I remember the first time making love to her there in the rounded chambers of her room, dead eyes of black jewels watching us, she above me, her face pressed too close to mine.

There was little romance in the act besides the odd pleasure of the moment but when the moment faded, I turned to her as she lay upon the bed, her back to me, and listened. I could hear her smile, this oddly sharp sound like scales rippling along

slate.

I lay back down then and let oblivion take me.

That was the first time.

We come, we men. Women traders have other venues to go to, other places where they are most needed.

Months later when I return, I will find a son or daughter here who will age twice as quickly as a human would and in a decade if a daughter, she will look for one like me to make love to.

It is an oddly terrifying thought, marred by time.

The males of the species seem not to mind. During that first time, her original mate sat in the front parlour; I heard him singing. It was not a dirge nor wrathful nor filled with hate or some fear of being supplanted by me.

It was an oddly ironic melody, not made in mockery toward myself but toward our situation.

They remember you see, each of them remembers subtly some racial imprint of once being human. Perhaps when I die if I should arrive here, I will go and do likewise.

Did you know a male cat has a barbed member? When in the act of making love, the female cries because of that, the pain of that. Now imagine remembering there was a time before when sex was something else, meant something else, felt like something else and suddenly someone from that time before emerges, arrives to rekindle an old reminiscence, an ancient recollection?

When she looks at me when we are making love, she does not see me, rather she sees the ghost of the man she used to know, the ghost of an old lover who might be here or might have taken the shape of something else.

I am a dead man in her eyes and all of us are wraiths to them, us making love to the living, they imagine us as *merely* dead.

When my son is born or daughter, or sons or daughters

and I return they will not call me father but rather the one who was born here, one who died in that other place, Earth or elsewise, and is now a native of this planet.

While I am not.

They will call the one singing in the parlour father and even should I die, even should I fall and arrive here there is always the third fear, married to the rest.

I may give birth to myself, may arrive in the womb I seeded, my human body exiled elsewhere and when I am old enough remember my mother in some unnatural embrace or worse if I become a daughter remember one of the men I knew, merchants like myself, and lustfully walk toward him in a decade.

Such fear is etched on all of us.

As for the embrace of our female counterparts and the lovers they find I shudder at those who love them.

I shudder at those they love.

Love will not find us all, I fear.

"You have too many fears," an older voice from another time inside of me whispers in my mind. "The wheel turns forever with you inside."

KSOAIBMOYA

He was born on Shayal Inrialith in the body of the great tree. Originally he was no larger than a mustard seed, a tiny speck of matter embedded in a creature the size of a flatworm, itself embedded in a larger worm, itself embedded in yet a larger worm until its final iteration was half the length and thickness of a man.

It was this smallest portion though which controlled the rest, which imagined itself with a name, a novelty here.

Ksoaibmoya.

Had it known beforehand it would have recognized the anagram as the name given by the Maya to the first race, creatures of clay who turned to stone in the light of the first sun.

But such a mythology had not been born here and such creatures never imagined upon an alien heaven.

Until now.

In his current state, he lacked gender but somehow imagined himself as he. During periods of torpor, he would remember something, reaching out and touching sunlight with an alien appendage a man would recognize as a hand.

Other times a great pleasure came to him when the tendrils of his control touched another source-mind when the branches of the tree which was his world reached into the branches of another and he almost felt leaves brushing against their mirror image, thinking somehow the other source-mind was a she.

In the labyrinth of the tree, he was a god.

He controlled the form, motion and rhythm of his creation but knowing there were other gods humbled him. Even sightless he perceived them.

They perceived him.

Later, much later, impossible to tell how long, the strangers came. They uprooted the body of his godhood, the

private creation of his own small universe and he was embedded in a further void, no longer of flesh but its absence.

His living corpse was placed in the hold of a ship along with her and others to be taken away to a stranger sort of hell.

Again, how long it was impossible to say but he arrived, the roots of his body touching new soil and the anxiety of his being stifled.

They rested together.

He noticed finally the small wound on the sixth day and he knew it was the sixth day for by now the foreign rhythm of the sun and the night were known to him.

He noticed then the intruder, a small glass-bodied worm thrusting into his skin, past it, to find him.

To murder him he feared.

Yet it was not to be.

The glass-bodied thing uprooted him and a thin metallic spine followed the white-crystalline trail in and he felt himself pulled from the body of himself out into naked space beyond.

Sightless he perceived the cage and himself placed there, naked, screaming voicelessly but screaming still.

Then the long wait. Forty days.

And in those forty days, he grew.

First, it was an eye.

He could see, first in infrared, then ultraviolent, then something else. A third sort of sight.

This was followed by hearing, the sense of taste, invisible slit of a throat tapering to the creation of a mouth.

Then the hand. It was a vestigial thing but it was a hand, grey lump fashioning to a tool, first two fingers then three.

Then four.

And a second hand joining it.

Then legs. His head was lifted and he was staring at the clear oblivion of a ground, mirror-smooth and flat and knew that

he was standing.

Forty days growing.

By the last day, they could no longer cage a man.

He was set free and all the time before seemed a dream.

But still, when he saw the tree he put his hand to his old self and recalled what he had been.

What was his name?

He was Ksoaibmoya, a denizen of the first race.

But yet he knew the wheel kept turning and his body kept turning with it. Beside him she stood who he had known when their bodies were native to the parasite world.

Her skin was fur-stained and the colour of gold now, she was a daughter of Erasigiel in a former life but given one more turning of the wheel she could grow into a human woman.

If given enough time.

He asked her name and she told it.

It was from a mythology he'd never heard before.

He asked why the people had done this, moved them from their heaven to this stranger hell.

"We needed the trees, and we could not leave you there. It would have been unkind."

He laughed at this, a shrill unnatural laugh then the man and woman began the long process of returning again to the forests of Shayal Inrialith.

And hope to be born as themselves there again.

"I think I will die today."

How old was he now? How old had he been?

For his sons and daughters and grandsons, granddaughters there was the single mourning of a life's end followed by arrival elsewhere, finding those stranger heavens, those stranger hells.

His sons and daughters perhaps had even been his ancestors along the tangled paths of time but it hardly mattered for wherever they ended up he did not join them.

Strange that.

He was an old man yet his dreams were not like theirs. At no point did he ever dream of strange cities of thorns or running through tall grass with cannibals behind him.

Instead, his dreams were simply . . . dreams.

There was the farm and himself and his wife but now she was gone and had become another woman somewhere else entirely and if he came there even if she remembered him, he wouldn't know her anymore.

His reality was reduced to the farm, to trees colour of dark salt, to grass singing tall and thin like mewling animal cries.

"I think I will die today."

Some did of course. Suicide has taken on a new dimension now. Criminals often took their lives hoping to arrive at places beyond all prison doors. Murderers suddenly choose their demise expectant of paying the price of their horrors and being born in another shape, in another place, in another time.

And some others choose to end their lives but for reasons they could never really describe . . .

How would he do it?

Could use a noose but detested the idea of being found hanging suspended like a criminal as was done in older days.

Instead, he went out into the forest behind his home, lay on the ground, and drank. He was deathly allergic, the alcohol eating acid-wise into him, suddenly becoming light-headed as he passed into oblivion. . .

He awoke in his bed, stretched his legs over the side, and let them rest upon the wooden floor.

He was still here.

He stared at the reflection of himself; still an old man.

He went where he had died before and there he was. His own body waiting for him there.

It wasn't rotting. The hooked nose was bent at a soft angle, eyes staring upward, mouth parted, ants coming from it.

He bit his lips then laid down, drank again, then again he died.

Four times he did this, arriving back at his bed each time.

Four corpses greeted him in the yard outside.

He called the doctor, pointed out the dead men which he was, and wondered why.

The doctor, poor young man, could not answer him.

It seemed impossible even in an impossible age.

"Perhaps you need a vacation," the doctor said.

First Erasigiel. He sipped on a poisoned nectar from the body of a plant that might once have been his son. Spasmed, body burnt . . . awoke in the room assigned him, still an old man.

In Shayal Inrialith he let himself drown in the shallow sea and awoke beside the tree where his foot first touched the ground.

In thirst-starved countries and in the empire of the ice he died, his slow suicide taken only to awaken himself again.

Finally, he understood.

It was not death that prevented him from leaving, not dying which kept him rooted to the spot. In his mind, he thought himself an old man then in his mind's eye saw his father threshing

fields, his father now gone.

For some the grief never left even knowing all one's loved ones were merely scattered seeds and not truly gone.

But grief remained.

How long had it lain inside of him?

He could not tell.

But so long as his father lingered in his mind his shape would never leave or become anything but this. He was not a man, he was a tome, his body the pages of one who dwarfed his younger years.

At the very edges of his memories when he had been a child there was a glimpse of an old man older than the very hills this memory-made man walked upon.

There were no other pictures, no mention of his name nor anything except what lay within his skull.

The chain of this lingered and prevented him from leaving and following his children into the other countries of the dead.

At last, upon the shores of a scarlet bone town, he found a painter and began to speak.

The painter, who could have been the very memory the old man described, painted upon a yellow-boned canvas the contour, eyes, and subtle turning of the mouth, leaving last the half-thought logic of a smile.

Then his first son was laid here. Then his second, his third. His daughters. His wife last, his perfect other half.

When the painter finished, having done his finest work he looked up at the old man staring at all his memories scattered on the floor as tiles in a mosaic, the old man wept.

The stone room felt oddly cold and clean then. He shivered even in the heat. The old man walked outside, his shoes making a sound like the way dead leaves sound or winter under heel, cracking into small pieces of themselves.

He went to the shore and stared at the empty ocean where

water had been a billion years before, sat upon scarlet and heard his first son's voice somewhere on the wind, then his daughter Salisya and saw her dance in the ancient sea as the ghost of the waters rose and seemed to drown her and her white pale garments.

But still, she danced.

And the old man smiled . . .

He was found hours later having succumb to something. The painter closed the old man's eyes and imagined either the pilgrim's soul had fled elsewhere or was somewhere still here.

Afterward the painter returned to his studio and brought the portraits out for sale.

Perhaps some of the buyers would even find pictures of themselves when they were young.

She was sailing toward oblivion. Again.

She had come here with neither the desire to die nor the desire to live. She had come with the desire to take which is usually a small death or a small life, depending on how you see it.

She was in the rounded barque barely large enough for her upon the sea of ice, the under-skin of the vessel hot as the sun allowing her to skim across it as if it were water and not the pure ice.

The frozen ocean of frozen worlds glistened below her and they swam in the dark.

The insects. They were like sticks, long-legged and blue-bodied things curling their lengthened forms through ice which seemed not to be there at all for them.

Afterward, the ice would freeze perfectly again meaning though they moved as if this were air or water it was as solid as stone to any other living thing.

She continued sailing toward the high mountain Meru where kings and queens reclined in mute splendour like daggers upon the grass, subtle as the venom which would surely pass.

At the foot of the mountain she stopped, oar clutched tight in her hands.

Here she would have to ascend. Flight was impossible. The air was not air nor thick enough even for a bird to fly in or the smallest fly. And one couldn't come to the Meru from void. One could only arrive by crossing the ocean to prove their desire to meet the gods of the empire of ice.

She ascended then, mountain tapering at the top though she knew this was an illusion. A further test.

The top of the mountain was too splinter-thin and impossible for anything larger than an insect to stand atop. But unless one did there would be no audience.

She climbed.

Time had no meaning here.

In the frozen seas, the insect daughters and sons of Shaelrija could age or retreat to a younger year at will. If one approached too close to the edge of old age, they'd simply retreat to a year closer to the geography of their own birth and all would be well.

In such a reality what mattered a day or season?

As such she could walk upward for ten years and to them it would be the same as if it had taken her but a day, even if it was not the same to her.

Though it was now the same to her.

She reached the top and stood, her feet passing cleanly through the spire, itself nothing but illusion meant to keep the unenlightened away.

Then the descent, passing into the caverns of their domain.

They writhed about her, small things no larger than her eye then came the third test before true communion.

She felt her eye grow within her skull. At first, the itching then the geography of a continent gave way upon her vision. It seemed a planet was growing inside of her sight.

And she was there, each strand of brown hair, each contour of her face, each soft sound of her voice and as she saw this, she saw the left eye of this other her grow and become yet another continent, with a third woman striding there just as the second strode along her sight.

She was within her sight now.

This was the third trap. Was she what she saw or was she the observer seeing? Was she now the image within another's mind or was she the mind observing an image of herself?

She closed herself then. She raised her left arm and placed her left hand over the eye, closing it, thereby closing all other sights as well. The continents fled away, her doppelgangers

dissolved, and since she acted separate from the image this became the first act among all of them.

Had she rationally tried to know where one began and another ended the logic would have run forever into their thousands and tens of thousands of years. To act was the only way to think.

There was no other way.

Thus reasoned beings whose actions included putting aside their own deaths.

Her third test complete she opened her eyes.

The rulers of Shaelrija asked her purpose, bleeding the questions in her mind. She explained her first purpose was to take portions of the pure ice to lands where ice was not, to stave off the dying thirst.

But secondly, she wished to find a way to do as they did, to pull back the edges of a year to a previous time.

For what was life if one knew that it would end?

Oh yes, one could arrive elsewhere but there were the wealthy who believed they deserved more years to be added to their single lives, more youth be added while old age was subtracted from them.

"What will you give us if we give this to you?" one of them asked without words, letting it linger behind the country of her skull.

"I will give you an ocean of fire," she replied, "a sea of heat to be placed along the southern pole where you may bathe and remember what it was to be warm."

"This alone you would give?" another asked.

"Need immortals anything more than a brush of death?"

The sound of laughter she felt rather than heard.

The deal was struck.

The first of the wealthy arrived in a season's time and they built a city upon the northern edge of the northern pole. The pure

ice was carved and sent to far starved shores and the wealthy did not age a day who arrived there.

Instead, their skin turned to a skein of ice, their lips grew blue, and their eyes turned to shards of glass, but they did not age. They neither ate nor drank nor slept but instead lingered in the empire of ice terrified of losing even one day to age.

Sad to say even after a century none imagined themselves in hell. Such a word did not exist here nor the fear of such a place.

Perhaps it was truly heaven, at least for them.

At any rate, the woman was well paid and asked if she wished to stay.

She mentioned a desire to see the fires of home and listened once to the mockery of one of her clients, himself imagining her a fool.

By then though it did not matter.

The woman had left to stranger heavens by this time.

MARIONETTES

They had been brought to Earth, these small white plants with blooms on them like half-rotted roses and they were placed on mantlepieces, tables, put in the pseudo-Victorian parlours of cities that had returned to older forms beside false-antique globes, bookcases, and leatherbound books between people wearing garments they might have worn a century before. Or two.

They had been placed like islands on the sun, dangerous and fragile and but a moment away from their ending but while they existed anyone caught within the boundaries of them could face an oblivion too.

If only for a season.

Imagine watching this small blossom turning toward the light. Now imagine yourself turning toward the blossom and suddenly what seemed no larger than your eye has swallowed an entire portion of the room.

And you are moving toward it, slowly, slowly, slowly your hand reaching out for it, and suddenly a few thorns are brushing your face.

But you do not notice it.

Suddenly and seemingly for a whole year your entire sight is occupied by a few petals, the world reduced and expanded into this.

Seen from outside another would simply notice you rise, walk toward the plant and your face be pierced and then watch you rise.

These two different perceptions of time would dominate till the chains are lifted from your throat, eyes, and mind

For even as you rise, as you move, you are something else.

When you speak you use the language it has, that small blossom using its voice through you, or rather you become its mouth, your very body nothing but its instrument.

Imagine a mother tending her children and within she is no more human than a fly half-buried in a web. Imagine a man tending his wife, and when the chains are broken, he will no more remember than would a blade of grass recall that it was cut.

During these brief seasons they are nothing but marionettes, means of allowing those mute prisoners to speak through the ones they infect desiring their infections.

For you see the roles shift in these moments and those men and women find themselves in the bodies of those blossoms, sans sight, sans taste, sans touch, sans memory. It is an oblivion one would envy in the forest of the suicides.

Then eventually they are changed back, marionettes put away, men and women taking back their places as the dead are given their chances to make amends, say goodbye, weep with sons and daughters who can't recognize them anymore.

Can you imagine living a life without sight or taste or touch and yet remember all those things? Worse. Can you imagine forever dreaming there was taste and touch and memory and never being allowed to wake to confirm if anything were true or if instead in those half-glimpsed seas of clarity one merely feared they had gone mad?

The plants were taken and scattered and whenever one of the bright blossoms died, they were taken to be laid beside the body and the grave of the last life they occupied.

As for those who were their marionettes a season they often gathered by funeral grounds and said certain prayers, hoping they were healed of their endings now.

Perhaps they were born in the empire of the ice or as some composite piece of flesh or straddling beneath storms of crushing gravity. It hardly mattered so long as they were given many centuries before they turned this way again and left like broken dolls whimpering in the night.

Living on Erasigiel was not like Earth. One could be born there but just as often other species visited. Sometimes the purpose was to trade or visit the dead who had forgotten their deaths. Or the reason I came, and those like me.

Do you ever wonder how punishment works?

Punishment depends upon guilt.

A person can only truly be punished if first they've done something worthy of the punishment. Otherwise, it's just violence for violence's sake.

On Argilistra one could suffer violence but never be guilty of a crime. Rather each body there on the insect planet was a composite flesh made of smaller pieces and usually those pieces were birthed separately from the body.

This meant that fingers, hands, limbs, even drops of 'blood' would infect the body and find their counterpart, murder them and then take over, becoming new fingers, new hands, new blood, even new hearts. Just think of that, of spending your entire life next to someone and then one day they look the same, act the same but are intrinsically someone else.

And the reason the other died had nothing to do with some crime they'd committed, nor did this new piece act on malice or revenge or retribution. It was simply a finger looking for a hand or a hand looking for an arm or a heart looking for a body to occupy itself in. You can't punish someone by their nature or through their nature either. On Erasigiel it is likewise.

Sometimes I think only on Earth was violence married to some supposed higher state and to be deserving of punishment sometimes feels like something only humans understand.

Or perhaps parasites too.

Anyway, I had come to Erasigiel to watch the passing of flesh. Have you ever been there? No? No. Then I'll explain.

Erasigiel is a planet dominated only by mammalian life. No insects, no arachnids, not even worms. Just mammals.

So instead of finding colonies of ants, you'd see small rodentlike things a hundred strong each the size of an ant but given only four legs always digging just the way ants would.

In waters swam whales, some no larger than half a man. Since there were no fish whales diversified to have every niche any other animal might have, with some tapered like eels, others thick blue beasts, and others a shade of pale.

Some looked like limbless snakes, a dog the length of a man her head no thicker than a python's.

And then there were the golden beings who almost looked like us. But this alone was not the horror of the place.

Some were eaters of flesh, and some were not. Or to be more explicit each family was divided along such a line.

When first born the young were split apart, some taking the role of predator, others the role of prey. Each litter was divided between those who consumed the grass and those who consumed their siblings. For each litter of ten nine were prey animals, one a predator.

Now you may imagine this meant the carnivore simply devoured their siblings whole cloth, so that by the time they reached adulthood only the lone predator was left.

No. No, that would have been too simple, too understandable for a human mind.

Each organism that fed upon the grass or the barks of trees or the deep algae of the ocean's edge was capable of removing pieces of themselves when their sibling came. I saw a snake remove half its body its sister fed upon and where the bloody stump had been a new tail began to grow.

I saw small bodies of antlike rats break apart small nodules of skin that their brother ate and noticed the wounds close

seconds after the feast had broken away.

So too the children of Erasigiel.

Every golden-bodied woman or man had brothers and sisters whom they fed upon. I watched a breast rip painlessly from a woman's body and be given to her sister as a meal.

There seemed no punishment in this. It was simply the nature of things here.

Then we learned of the ritual of the passing of flesh.

And so that night I sat in the room and they were there, sisters preparing their final act, one a shade of gold her sister a shade of green. Once I associated the colour gold with the living but now no longer do.

The ritual. Let me describe the ritual to you.

In the inner room of the house, past the dining area, and the sleeping rooms, in an inner chamber colour of burnished gold was a small pool of water, stairs descending into it, and a few chairs, one of which I sat upon. The water was the colour of wine blistering in sunlight. In the specifics of the ritual, it is claimed the water must seem this exact shade which I cannot describe perfectly. The best I can do is what I've said and nothing more.

The sisters had invited me to watch.

I had had sex with both of them days before and in exchange for this, they promised I could watch what was to come.

We had eaten first. I was always surprised by that, thinking the ritual would require her hunger but I was wrong.

For the last feast, I had eaten my rations though.

The sister green had felt slightly insulted I supposed.

I sat here upon this chair whose bones were taken from an ancestor. They did not bury the dead you see but used every piece, every bone and piece of sinew they did not consume.

The sister green lay upon the waters and did not sink.

The sister gold bent over her kneeling upon the waters and

she did not sink.

The sister gold raised her face skyward as if staring through the ceiling and then with one single thrust buried her teeth into her own sister's throat. In the act of this, the sister began to dissolve away, melting into the water as her murderer-sibling ate of her as she burned into fog. The upper portion of her took the shape of clouds and all this the sister gold devoured, leaving bones and something else, for they were speaking, two voices becoming one.

Have you ever wondered how mankind remembers those times and lives before, why suddenly merely going from planet to planet would awaken this in us?

On Erasigiel were we taught certain techniques on how to access our racial memories, though this ritual no human could ever be taught nor could any human learn. For as she was feasted on all her memories flowed into her sister until there was no difference between the two. Two sets of perceptions fled into one body and the woman I had embraced three nights before now existed beneath the skin of the other.

I cried then watched her die, sobbed, and sat and the tears kept going and I couldn't stop.

Much later we sat in the dining room, table between us made of an oak brought from the old Earth and she mentioned in passing her sister's death as if discussing the weather. She had been old enough to die you see. She was thirteen.

In her hands she was fingering the jewels of her sister's eyes, two pieces seemingly made of tiger's eye which were the crystalized remains of her own sister's sight.

But this alone had not made me weep. Strange to write it here. If I merely say I cried it sounds so forced, so unnatural but if seen from outside, if another had seen a woman murdered and a man squatting there upon a chair his face shifting from curiosity to panic to terror to grief then they might understand. Sometimes

emotions can only be truly seen from outside.

The other deeper point was how many lifetimes the sister green always had the same fate. The wheel moved and time after time she had come here, always obediently led to the pool and the bright teeth of another, her last cries as eternal as the night.

I wept because the last feast would never end for her.

She was always that thing upon the table being devoured with no more regard for her fate than wind might have for ocean.

And if I were religious I would have said she'd done something wrong but punishment does not exist here, nor sadism, nor cruelty. It is just the way of things, even unto the end of time.

The sister gold invited me to bed and against my baser instincts I did a terrible thing.

I said no and went out and all alone kept looking at the stars.

THE PAINTING

An artist makes a painting of a woman.

She seems a blind shadow in the painting and is in a labyrinth of golden corridors. In her hand is a second labyrinth. And in this second labyrinth a second her.

The shadow being blind does not know she is in a painting, nor does she know there is a maze upon her hand nor does she notice a violet sun in the distance save as heat if heat were felt but since this is a painting no heat is there.

It is just an image and since she is herself an illustration if she were made aware she would have no senses to guide her.

It would be the same as if she were not there at all.

Our artist has penned this masterpiece. Again. His studio is littered with her creations, always the same, always different.

Beyond his studio is a scarlet world with islands of black foliage and cathedrals resting atop them.

All this he does not notice though.

Only his work interests him as if only his work were alive.

The object of his obsession, his blind child does not notice stars in that painted night. He has not seen stars in forever but as an artist, one need not see to create.

Our artist could imagine there is a labyrinth beyond his door, mirror-smooth golden walls, and corridors leading in all directions but he does not so do because it is all made there on the canvas.

It is all there.

Eventually, he will die.

He tells himself this often. Eventually, he will die.

But death never seems to come.

At night as his canvas he stands toward he fears his body nothing but paint smeared to its current shape as she blindly paints him along the canvas's other side.

Or perhaps both he and she are part of the same canvas and beneath the maze on her hand is his studio, himself painting outward the universe he is trapped within.

Imagine an ammonite moving about the chambers of itself . . .

THE RAVEN, THE DOVE

She had a raven and a dove. I remember this quite clearly. She loved them both. Loved them in their cages. And then they died, the black-bodied raven first, the white-winged dove after.

She died as well. So, I went wandering.

One day in a vintage season I went to a bazaar and saw a couple standing before a silver cage.

The woman had feathered hair a shade of white and the man a mane of shadow and before them in the cage sat a tiny birdlike thing, for all creatures of Qanin were avian.

I bent close and gazed within.

And she was there. Her wings were brittle, her eyes the eyes she had once when human, sapphire-wise which had loved me in her gaze.

They had tended her they said. She was their fondest artistry. They had shaped her wings to the colour of moonstone and her beak was sharpened to a diamond finesse.

I purchased her for less than I expected, my little human dove with her strange scared eyes, as turning back the couple grinned an alien grin, counted coins, and counted them again as if the making and unmaking of three lives had occurred simply for the singing of a few pieces of metal aslant the air.

I opened the cage to set her free.

But she remained. She wouldn't dare.

And all the time the knife I kept in my pocket kept whispering to my blood to be set free from my veins out into the naked air, and I almost obliged it. Almost.

But I too wouldn't dare.

I sat and watched night fall like the shadow of a wing against the stony lands. Until I heard her sing at last.

Then I rose and returned the way we came, I smiling for a time, I smiling last.

THE PLAGUE SHIP

It was whispered of, the ship. *The* ship, as if there were no others. It was said that when the last sickness perished, the final disease there was a great sigh across the continents of salt, a thought of peace.

Yet when new children came to be some of them clung to a nightmare of some hideous war where beasts the colour of blood screamed voicelessly overhead the flowing rhythm of winds the children could not feel.

All they felt was the silent scream.

Can you imagine staring into the eyes of your son and realizing his life before he was a plague? Can you imagine staring into the eyes of your daughter and realizing her previous days were spent murdering those you loved as unconsciously as a blank void asleep? For those children of the plague years had no conscious mind. That horror was reserved for later.

For in time those who realized their origin began the slow exodus, the creation of their ark.

Sons and daughters began to build the ship to carry them away and we did not stop them. Could not. For in those days, we could not understand the length and breadth of the wheel and so it seemed appropriate for them to depart who had caused so much misery in a previous life.

There was a rose of fire on a final night and the ship departed and strode darkness and we were left alone for our grief to contemplate.

And they are there now, so some believe, there in the prison of the ship even still waiting to die and then they will return to plague again and slaughter one another as penance for their sins.

Others think they will simply fade to other countries, their multitudes shrivelling all the time, reducing their numbers one by

one, and each time a death occurs all gather there and wonder why the plague has not taken them, why they die of wounds or void or grief or their hand but never of disease.

And all the time the sickness of our grief continues, those left in exile longing for those we cast away. And the sickness of our sadness will continue till days are spent, our nights with them and we awaken finally in other lands forever praying we may see our children again.

But even after this will our deeds still cling to us?

Can a sick soul ever be remedied simply by forgetting all the terrible things it did?

The spires of Qanin turned in all directions ever upward coiling like ammonite shells about the centres of themselves.

You'd find along the stone-sapphire walls lovers embraced in each other's arms. The feather-haired women and men of the world would dissolve lengthwise together like parchment under glass and only in this state could they conceive.

Afterward, caenus-like genders would shift, male to female or the opposite of this so that each time they conceived they returned to a separate state. The more they loved the more times they were permitted to become what they had been.

Along the world's edge just before the iron strand bridge which linked eyrie to eyries, the duellist danced.

To observe her one would find a young woman barely twenty, slender, with eyes the colour of sand. But she was not the only entity within her.

Within was a parasite, a silver thread writing and sinewing her blood. Its, his, tendrils extended along her nervous system allowing him to control her, but only as she wished. She was the gatekeeper of his intentions, capable of silencing him but when freed he was capable of moving her faster than an eye could see.

Now they duelled upon the world's edge.

Each thrust from the parasite's silver blade was perfectly arranged, each stance honed after centuries. She was the latest piece, the latest vessel of the knowledge he poured into her, and simultaneously he was only capable of this at her insistence.

In this state, they were capable of almost anything.

Far below seemed oceans of mist. Far below seemed seas of opaque glass. Were she to fall or make a single misplaced step she would perish, he would perish, and they would awaken in other bodies elsewhere. To start it all again.

The feather-haired woman moaned along a far wall. How many times had they done this? How many times had they shifted to another shape? It was impossible to tell.

She was not the woman she had been. In joining she became added to, given more than she had been.

Her name was Balanjir and her life divided between the time before him and the time now, after first encountering him.

He was Balanqijal.

Once he had simply retired into the jungles, his glasslike body bladelike in its prison. He had been impaled into the trees and could not escape what he was.

Then liberation on an alien shore, slipping away from what he was into something new. Even the memory of his body changed. He was a silver worm, he was certain of it, but images had been taken from him at that time and he had seemed somehow less.

Perhaps it was always thus in looking at oneself from the vantage of the future, looking at oneself in the past.

Then he began his explorations.

He scoured new worlds obsessed with the things he'd loved when he was a man, even now that he was limbless, sightless.

And he offered himself to them.

A simple operation, mere surgery to place himself in their blood and to grant them the knowledge he had. It was not always human beings of course.

Once he had dwelled upon a world of sixty billion all living on a single continent where sex was so commonplace that words such as "husband" or "wife" always took on a plural meaning. He walked in their being, lived their life, and provided what he knew to his host.

Then the host died, yet he survived.

He became a commodity unto himself. He was the wealth

he spent by giving all he was to another.

He became Ikerrian a time, a living metaphor that changed appearance based on the expectations of the observing audience.

He took on the mask of a phosphorescent woman who had bacteria running through her veins on a lightless world. He let her experience light and in return watched her limbs move of their own accord from behind her eyes, sapphire blue riddling her veins.

Then she died of old age, he watching the bacteria flicker out like fireflies until her body was cold and black as night and he was carried on to the shores of safety, still mourning her.

Now in the body of a human, he continued his exile.

How long could he live like this? He did not know.

Nor did she. Each sinew of her muscles, flick of her wrist was instructed by him yet she was instructing him as well. "He" did not exist, had no gender exactly. Balanqijal was a worm dreaming himself a man. Only when he stopped dreaming would he let go and perish and be reborn, and only then.

By now of course there was no point in duels.

No wars existed to mar a face.

Humanity had scattered and all other life with it until even words like human had no meaning anymore. Balanjir was human meaning she was a native of Earth but to say she looked like her ancestors from so many millions of years ago would be a mistake.

Even if life was finite the shapes of life were not and so even though she was human there was no mistaking her for one of her ancestors. Her form had changed.

Was it the sand colour of her eyes or the number of joints to each finger of her hand? Was she taller, thinner, missing ribs or were her ribs too close as if compressed in some unnamed torture?

Or was it the expression on her face as she practiced which no human being could have made until the current age?

Impossible to say.

She lived in the house of a future form.

Her fingers wrapped around the curved blade, each movement honed perfectly as a mechanistic ritual, as if she was not she acting, nor he, but them. Condensed by the centuries each skill had been added to the next host and the next, a perfect repository of movement and action and desire and intent until now she was not a mere girl of a few years but an immortal, a titan. A god.

But her immortality of memory would only last so long as her body did and when it failed her godhood would fail as well.

As such there was no tomorrow for her, no yesterday, only the perfection of now to guide them and nothing more than this.

Each thrust of the curved silver blade was the current note in a symphony but no matter how brilliant she knew instinctively it was but a note only. The symphony would go without her and she would be alone again, perhaps not even made aware that here on Qanin she was or had ever been.

She closed her eyes, letting him feel her muscles in his control. The ritual dance became a final act of perfect freedom. She was living through him now, parasitically devouring him in her embrace, in her memories, her senses.

He was her narcotic now.

But like all things it ended.

Later would come the night and her in her room preparing to sleep, feeling the dream to come. For at times like these, he dreamed again he was a man making love to her and she a creature making love to him. The dream was not a product of sleep or memory but something deeper, more terrible, and more certain.

It was a foretaste of a future day when she would recline in jungles and he would seek his rest and they would meet then as equals embracing for a season, and later or earlier he would slough off his exile and gain bones and teeth and skin and find her

in a bazaar, and afterward, they would meet in a room too much like this room, to make love.

Outside the parchment bodies of the lovers continued in their embraces then each regained their bodies, looked at one another as strangers might be uncertain why they'd even met, and then went on their ways and never saw one another ever again.

Content.

THE LAST MAN

The last man sat upon the shores and watched the last sunset in the final sky. In the distance, black-bodied creatures cursed and tore at one another and he knew there were no more battles left nor ground to step upon.

And all the sands he walked upon were but his bones from eons before and eons before that and all the dead had become as sea foam in the mists of the final ocean of thought.

He sat there waiting, watching himself dissolve away into the mist as all others had gone into before him.

He watched as he faded, final beasts with him gone, nothing left to watch and even the final sun departed into that last perfect night, where silence held the lease at last.

And yet somehow, somewhere the song continued like whisperings in the grass, like winds howling or the way wolves sing until even this became a lullaby.

And the last universe was at peace at last.

Thus ended the nature of things not with a cry nor a whimper but life contemplating itself as if all the universe were a mirror we stared into, and through.

Waiting for the mirror to stare back at us.

Harm

Part I.

they meant
no harm

Prologue

A girl who does not speak.

A man who has fallen in love with the child of a tree.

A boy who no longer bleeds.

A woman claiming she is no such thing.

And a place where healing has become an art, designed to restore and correct all of nature's flaws.

Whether the patient desires it or not.

This place it is called the Alhyrmgorod, the "Paradise of Flowers."

To others it has another name.

It is called the place where they envy those in hell.

Story One
Seila's Story

A jewel. A girl. A flower. The darkness.
Ruins. A grave. Tears. An eye. A spider's web.
Time, time, time . . .

She had been brought to the mansion, itself perfectly appearing as her ancestral home. She had been taken to her rooms as those she had when a child and now sat in the same white spider-wire chair she had known as a girl, reading again *Rappaccini's Daughter*.

If asked how she arrived here she could not say. The mansion appeared as it had before though she knew that her home had burnt in the fire and he with it.

And though the mansion looked the same all descriptions of it failed her.

Yes, it was the same shade of white marble, same fourteen columns, seven on each side of the great door which led from the mansion out into the green valley beyond and the three slanted ogre eyes of the windows of the second story were there. Still, so slightly all of this shifted from her gaze, becoming *other*, though, since she no longer spoke her lack of descriptions hardly mattered.

The doctors allowed her time to adjust and were doing so now. Waiting. Had she opportunity she could have tried to discern one from the other but the doctors' faces all blurred together, though all were women, and since Seila had no longer the will to speak it seemed she had no longer the will to remember.

At some point though Elidryse appeared.

Where Seila was brown-haired, brown-eyed, where she always wore the virginal white summer dress her father loved so,

where she was always slender, her skin a nearly translucent white, Elidryse differed in almost every way.

Her eyes were silver and bright, her hair a shade of black so rich as to absorb light. Her hands were spider thin, her body gaunt as if forced somehow to ripple past the limits of Seila's own body and her skin was not a translucent pale but seemed almost to glow a sickly grey.

Elidryse had been wheeled out by one doctor or another and allowed to sit near Seila Rhonne.

At first, Seila did not raise an eye to her. Could not. No more could Elidryse raise eye to Seila Rhonne but instead had occupied her attention upon several small wasps which were crawling across the ground. Seila returned to her book, paused, turned eyes up, looked down again. Elidryse did likewise.

Unknown to either girl the doctors had arranged the surgery by now though neither girl was consciously aware of it.

The day passed uneventfully as all such days do in the Alhyrmgorod.

Night was otherwise.

In her room, Seila could still smell his scent, even now, even here. As she lay mute and unmoving she felt him opening the door, closing it, imagining his body pressed blackly against her own and screamed, or tried to.

But language fails to adequately describe human cruelty.

The wraith of him slowly dissolved away, smearing himself against the white bedding, becoming unable to escape the flat surface as if pinned between two sheets of glass.

She still beneath him though.

Simultaneously Elidryse was in her room, not some part of the mansion but in one of the burnt-out shelters which had occupied the wastes of Tscalne. She could feel still the Dying Fire in the distance and see once or twice the curling fungal shapes of

their final weapon.

No body pressed against her there.

She was alone, feeling the heat softly tear into her skin, beneath it, and could sense her skin unmaking, remaking as the fires continued, warm and soft and mild and never-ending.

She had forgotten how to scream and even if she had her voice was no longer her own.

Then the day came, each girl imagining the night had been infinitely long.

Into their rooms the doctors went, placing both girls back in the garden although neither could remember the path which led from their rooms to the green beyond.

In a moment they were inside, in another out again.

Seila reached down for her book which grew from the grass and Elidryse began searching for wasps or moths which appeared only when she looked for them.

Neither girl noticed the jewel as it came blossoming upward from the stem of an alien flower there between them.

Was this intentional, this inability to see?

Impossible to tell.

The doctors could have hidden this from their view but just as likely both girls were too broken to realize the cure lay so close at hand.

Day passed then.

One of the doctors came to check on them. As she did so the shadows bled forward stretching from the mansion even though the sun was shining down upon them, making the shadows an impossibility.

Eying the discrepancy the doctor spoke to the mansion softly and the shadows pooled back though not without a certain protest, even if unheard.

The doctor checked both girls then, staring at them eye to eye, checking their wrists, listening to their hearts, their lungs,

noticing each blood vessel as it went circling their veins like the orbits of certain planets which the doctor had visited in her youth.

And all the time the jewel continued growing there, a pigeon egg-shaped stone of deepest scarlet which shimmered in the summer heat and seemed to sing a fire of its own.

Finally, the doctor determined all to be in readiness.

She stood and signalled for the stone to act.

Seila turned her eyes down conscious of something coming into her sight and through the lens of the jewel she saw the valleys of her home ablaze.

She saw the homes of men burnt and scattered and great flowers of fire rupturing from the ground.

At the same Elidryse drew her own eyes down and through the stone medium saw the wastes of Tscalne restored, saw her mother and her people, and then peered within to see . . . what Seila experienced, echoed and re-echoed like waves against a shore.

The two girls suddenly were aware of each other and of their lives. There came a point when Seila could not remember being Seila then, when she recalled spending days in the silvery coffin of a torturous device, something Elidryse had gone through before the last war when children like her had been used as the minds behind their weapons.

And Elidryse could suddenly see the mansion and Seila's father who was her father now, the angular jut of his jaw, the dark blue of his eyes, and feel him pressing his full weight down into her and upon her, suffocating her in his desires.

The song continued then which was the distilled essence of Elidryse's last cry and Seila's own thrown together with a further funeral sound.

The death scream of a world.

It did not matter if the world was Tscalne or if the world were Seila's for now there was no difference.

The doctor continued watching as the girls were thrown together, closer, closer, the sum of their abuses collapsing, expanding till in one final act both girls rose, clutching for the other . . .

Satisfied the doctor continued in her rounds and some days later the patient was released back into their life. Alone neither girl had possessed the strength to stand but now both were capable finally of remembering, of speaking, and of being heard.

Of course, the jewel had done more than simply allow them to feel the other's lives. The girl who left the Alhyrmgorod was not Seila nor Elydrise for this girl had eyes of brown flecked with silver and her hair was dark though not as dark as night and if asked her name she would answer it was Seiladryse since neither Seila nor Elidryse existed anymore.

This was considered a great success by those of the Alhyrmgorod and if they had any human feelings left might well have celebrated long into the night.

Story Two
John's Story

Black trees. A scorpion. The duel. A desert.
A mirror sea. The girl. Her death. Her birth.
Country of the black incestuous trees.

I. The desert had bled scarlet so long it seemed the world composed of a great wound.

John Cartier stood in places which afterward he could not remember or sometimes taking his way went on walkabout through sand seas which lingered below since all the cities of Aryaphis were built into the mountains now.

There were seasons where he trod only into those sand seas hunting for sand whales or grootslangs or those little demons one remembers only when they are half asleep.

But since he was no longer truly on Aryaphis death could not bend her knee to claim him. At times he was again in Ulcairith, the city of her birth, or seemed so, but the longer he walked those streets sooner buildings became the great edifices of her face, her breasts, her hands as if it was growing into the body of his love.

He would struggle and then move through invisible sea of heat which still lingered on, reaching for her hands even as they splintering into his.

For from the palms of her hands sprang stigmata of small thorns and at such times his own he bloodied, tearing them against walls the colour of corpse's flesh.

Then he would rise into the sky though his body remained there upon the ground, watching the streets turn into veins and the sinews of her body, he nothing than a parasite crawling through.

As if he were the thing that killed her.

Of course, all of this was nothing but the Alhyrmgorod,

and he, its prisoner. Though in his sorrow it did not matter if he were freed or not.

II. Dr. Elriasgalos strode Ulcairith making notes. The enarei scorpion women were here and for several long minutes the doctor made sketches of them.

She noted the long curl of their tail leading to the bright bulb like a flower's face dripping venom. She noted the yellow cat's eyes and the way their skin shimmered in the dark turning from bright black to a cool neon blue.

And she noted how John Cartier continued his slow spiral toward suicide.

For several long funeral hours, she peered into his mind peeling back layers of his life as one would scar tissue of an ancient wound and after making her excavations noted where N'ltah lay.

N'ltah was the woman John loved, though woman was too simple a term. Those of Aryaphis were all women whether enarei or yrialon but divisions of gender existed here. It was just that what were considered men on Aryaphis were not considered men on Cartier's Earth.

John continued imagining the various ways he could die. N'ltah had been the only love of his life who walked through his yesterdays like a giant, all others dwarfed in her shadow.

Dr. Elriasgalos considered what had to be done.

She could have simply erased all memory of her from his mind or perhaps could have eliminated his capacity for love. But being stranded on Aryaphis for so long, being the only one like himself, if she eliminated his love or memories all that would be left would be his violence.

No.

Another way was needed.

Dr. Dularialria appeared and sat beside Elriasgalos.

They began speaking.

Have you decided what is to be done with him?

Many options. Two I think are most interesting to try.

If they fail?

The image of John Cartier appeared before them and with a flicker of movement from Elriasgalos was his skin removed, muscles of his body shorn away, and nervous system torn up like blunt strands of a spider's web.

Then was the image put back together again, though no longer John Cartier.

We can always try again, Elriasgalos said. We have time.

Dularialria rose from their seat beneath the black trees of Ulcairith and turned to go, mentioning an appointment in Samara.

Elriasgalos pretended she did not understand the meaning or the threat.

III. John Cartier abandoned Ulcairith again and took step to the places of punishment, Elriasgalos following.

N'ltah he could still see, herself occupying mountains, even the great mirror sea of Lexithymnia which he was coming to now.

This sea pooled at the lowest tier of all of Aryaphis surrounded by the great hills so like the roiling forms of dragons rising and lowering, like the form of N'ltah rising and lowering turning to see the man passing neath her gaze.

In his mind's eye N'ltah was not simply the first enarei he had encountered nor the first he understood. She was the first love of his life and the short seasons coming together crowded out all the years before or all the years to come.

He walked the mirror sea and staring down saw himself.

As he saw himself.

He was a twisted thing now, his face distorted, his limbs unnatural, eyes red as sand. This view of himself came about

when N'ltah began to sicken and he suspected himself the cause.

No proof existed though but he was the only man in all the world and she had been with him all those years and her death was such an unexpected loss there was no other cause but his presence.

So, as he walked the form below further distorted and distended, hair crumpling like shards of glass and eyes splintering to four or six, he no longer aware of what his old shape had been.

Soon, despite the protection the asylum provided him, he would find a means to escape into death's other country. It was coming soon and this Elriasgalos could not allow.

But how to stop the fatal act?

It was as he was approaching Ascaithlos that she began to consider the only outcome that would satisfy him. Ascaithlos was a spiralling ancient structure, an endless ammonite coil that rose into the sky and descended below the ground and this was where were housed the monsters of Aryaphis.

Here the prisoners lay, themselves too dangerous to remain in the company of their own. Instead, each was given a single chamber, itself suspended above and below another, each chamber connected by a door, allowing them only the freedom to ascend or descend. No other direction was permitted them.

But since Ascaithlos was infinite at a certain point the monsters stopped, knowing there was nothing to do but wait. Here Elriasgalos began to scrawl her plan, standing behind John Cartier as his fingers itched again and again for the blade.

By the time he reached Ulcairith, she had drawn up her plans for wars.

IV. The enarei, as was said, had no men, though they were not all women. Here is the explanation.

The scorpion daughters of Aryaphis do not give birth themselves. Though women it is not they who provide wombs for

their children. Rather the black trees are where their children come from.

The bright barb of their tail delivers not only venom but life. When enarei seek to mate they go to one of the black trees tended to by cyclops-eyed yrialon in their ziggurat cities and when they pierce the bark with their barbed instruments the tree absorbs their essence so in time hanging from branches are daughters come.

These daughters are mirror-copies of their mothers and it is not uncommon for mother and daughter to remain close together for many years afterward, existing in a relationship a human would take for incest though such words do not exist here, nor men, nor tears.

These mirror copies once severed from fathers contain a fragment of what their mothers knew at the time of their conception so that although they appear the same each must learn anew, and become a new being, so even if all the women of Ulcairith had the face of N'ltah Yarotep they still would not be here.

This is why even if some daughter of her remained John Cartier was incapable of letting loose his grief.

So, he entered again into the white marble city of Ulcairith, itself nothing but the shape the Alhyrmgorod had taken now and Elriasgalos disguised herself as a daughter of N'ltah.

She came forth and claimed herself N'ltha Yarotep and demanded a duel of he who had killed her mother.

But even with his blade which now miraculously appeared, even with his skills honed in fire and war, even with his strength he was no longer capable of defending himself and so he accepted, hoping to see the face of N'ltah peering over him, her hand having taken his life in payment for the taking of her own.

The duel was over quickly and with a final thrust of her barbed blade she pierced his heart.

He expected to die but death eluded him.

He was dragged half dying to a copse of trees and placed, still standing before them, amongst them, still uncertain why.

And then he began to change.

It was subtle at first, then faster, time slowly collapsing as his senses began to fail him, his skin hardened and blackened he became a tree.

He felt the hands of the cyclops-eyed yrialon tending him, those vine women who symbiotically herded the black trees of the enarei and in return were shielded and protected in their cities, even in far Tliyaxael-Tlia.

Had he eyes anymore he could have seen their green hands touching his new body, their single blue eyes so like the mirror sea watching his skin smooth or tear.

And then he felt his body pricked like needles and realized he was slowly giving birth.

He felt the branches of his body slowly pulsing as skin bone and sinew flooded along the reaches of them and felt the weight of certain small bodies bristling along his topmost limbs.

And all the time Athaliyalhrialia and Shyaliscalria watched over him. Two yrialon remained and tended to him night and day as he heard without hearing cries of infants he had made and heard without hearing songs of Athaliyalhrialia, feeling the bright plumes of her hair brushing against the scarred tissue of his body.

This continued for many years, as he imagined time, listening to their songs, feeling the touch of their skin, giving birth again and again till there came the day when his flesh broke free and the void where his heart was filled, and his eyes restored though not with flesh but steel.

The heart that beat in his chest was a machine's heart and his eyes were no longer capable of seeing as humans did.

Freed of his imprisonment, no longer capable of seeking

death, having done so in its way he turned to take one last unhuman look at all of Ulcairith, to see N'ltah's face staring at him from every enarei which he saw, heard the thorn-songs of Athaliyalhrialia one last time and then collapsed out of the void to the home upon the Earth he had known when he had been a man.

But all was strange and stranger here. He no longer could remember what being a man meant so instead simply stood in the fields a time, pretending himself a scarecrow.

Eventually tiring even of this though he went forth, trying to understand, seeking passage to some war.

So that he might forget.

This Elriasgalos considered a great success and after his sessions were done sketched Ulcairith again and the mirror sea and even Ascaithlos and its prisoners as they screamed.

But what they screamed of she hadn't suspected yet.

Story Three
Basil's Story

A knife. Suppression. Gold. Poisonous things. Menageries. Uniquely erotic.

I. Basil Kingsley had his hands wrapped about the young girl's throat even in his dreams. The doctors watched as from his cell one girl and then another came, later to be discarded.

In his dreams, they never ceased and when he awoke they never ceased, his mind divided always in that second realm where the sound of bones was heard, breaking.

There were many such as Basil Kingsley, Basileus ton Basileon, and though they could never cure them all certain specific patients demanded specific remedies.

Dr. Dularialria had been chosen for this and had spent some centuries carefully considering proper treatment.

She had scoured small corners of various worlds, looking for the exact fulcrum upon which to break the man and then smiling settled upon Tlyalix, choosing the tlyalixa Marigny and Astralabe to be the perfect victims.

So, one night in January when the wind howled the strongest out of his cell the criminal went, plunging through an outer darkness he mistakenly considered hell.

And when he woke, he stood upon Tlyalix, free to scrawl his own morality across an innocent soil.

II. At first, he did not believe he had been freed.

It was not possible. But he found himself upon a street and peered up at the angular buildings staring down at him and watched people passing by who did not in the slightest notice him.

And so, he began to plot out who would fall first.

He didn't have to wait long for this though.

A woman walked past, tall and shapely and his instincts took hold and he began to follow her, Dularialria following him.

The woman he was pursuing was Marigny, about to meet Astralabe there in the upper room. But it was alright.

Basil knew how to get past any lock, and besides.

It was clear someone was on his side.

III. Marigny was dark-skinned and eyed and Astralabe his skin was white as marble. They occupied a small room with few furnishings and neither noticed as the door she shut was not shut completely.

They talked, having little else to do.

There was a balcony beyond leading to the air and out of this they could have seen any number of sights, people passing below, or bland buildings across the way.

The door opened and the murderer entered, closing the door behind him as he went.

As if on cue the knife appeared in his hand and he moved first toward Marigny who turned, regarded him but said not a word nor did her features betray any emotion whatsoever.

Astralabe likewise turned, his eyes cool and calm, his mouth never rising to a smile or falling to a snarl.

The knife touched the tip of her throat but gave so much easier than he expected it would.

Basil was pulled forward by the absence of any force as if Marigny were not completely there.

Astralabe stepped forward then and the knife tore a long, jagged line along his cheek, of which no blood fell or came.

Nor did Marigny bleed.

The dark woman and the man whose skin was the colour of snow regarded the murderer and calmly took him in hand, the way a child would be taken by its parent.

Hours passed in the room.

They passed even more slowly for Basil.

Later the three emerged. Astralabe's wounds had been stitched up and Marigny's throat repaired, as well as a few other wounds laying crossways along her body.

But the worst wounded was Basil Kingsley himself.

He walked with a subtle marionette motion, his eyes always straight ahead now, his mouth never rising to a smile nor falling to a snarl.

He was taken and displayed the way one would display an extinct animal suddenly come alive again, a piece fit for the museum or the menagerie.

Now why was this so?

IV. Those of Tlyalix long ago decided that flesh was itself somehow a crime and desire a thing to be abhorred. So gradually they removed piece after piece of themselves, eyes and hands and skin until by the time Basil Kingsley had arrived very little of the flesh remained.

And then he came, drawing the blade, striking, murdering Marigny and Astralabe, striking again, murdering again, but they like fixed points in time always returned to the same place, oblivious to his cruelty.

But not unappreciative of it.

They changed him then. First, the hands which they severed and then replaced, the legs, that between his legs, then the arms, the eyes, leaving only a little sliver of his old self behind to be savoured as one would a wine of violence.

And this sliver they then took as one would an immunizing fire, slowly scattering it all across Tlyalix.

Pieces of him they left in little corners of their minds,

allowing them once or twice to be a little violent themselves, just a bit, way an innocent soul can attend an execution without regrets or way a lover can leave her beloved, to hang.

In time they gave name to these violent impulses. Y'gonanac. These were times set aside when one or another could shed their chrysalis lives, draw forth a blade and cut or tear pretending a parasite were there in the glass shards of their blades and afterward forget since no one was ever really harmed and those who did this regularly became known as the jaud tlyali, which meant "the king of kings" in their native tongue.

But, the only one who truly suffered was the parasite itself, allowed only to glimpse briefly the products of its intent and then return to nothing, dreaming a dreamless sleep.

Dularialria sighed in seeing all this and smiled and was quite pleased.

This was something she had been practicing for some time now, just as Dr. Kzairyn practiced laughter. She practiced for long years how to laugh, to sound as if something were absurd in her presence. It had not been easy to practice such a thing. She had no understanding of why people laughed or cried.

People were simply things, after all, pretending to be.

Story Four
Illyria's Story

The end. The machine. A fire. A confession.
A child. A cure. The gyre. The darkness.
The beginning.

I. Kzairyn, Elriasgalos and Dularialria sat about in the heart of the Alhyrmgorod. Others flitted about as well, passing forward and back through future and past, creating reflections of existing worlds or places, healing all the time.

Or making the attempt.

The three were engaged in studying Illyrin, now Illyria. Once Illyrin had been a man but his body had been destroyed, replaced with that of a woman.

There was some discussion on how to heal him though.

Having been forced into this new body, having spent several years now learning to inhabit this it was uncertain if returning things as they were would be enough.

So it was that Illyria was brought into the Alhyrmgorod.

He was reliving his time before when he had spied upon a rival nation, spending his time in hidden places. At certain moments his own face peeled before him in certain reflections and at other times it was the new face of the young woman with her sandy brown hair and dark blue eyes.

All three doctors watched as he continued his mission to bring certain documents back across the border to the country of his home.

But seeing ahead they knew that this would fail.

It was near the border that Illyria realized the world was wrong. The city of the Cahirgorod had never seemed so empty and though there was the danger of pursuit Illyria's instincts betrayed any fear.

The world was wrong.

At midnight Illyria stopped, just before the border, seeing in the distance his own city, seeing behind him city of his enemies.

The doctors knew the mission would fail but this was new as if somehow he could perceive them standing behind him.

Which he could.

Subtly he turned upon the road where no one walked but him, stretching out his hands, Kzairyn not moving from his grasp since, as she knew, he could not see her, only for his hand to touch her hand as he stepped from the borderland out and into the heart of the Alhyrmgorod . . .

II. He stood in the Outer Dark. This was a place beyond time and space, that hidden country between one universe and another.

Sans senses but not sans time's passage he felt himself drowning in the black and heard the voices of others screaming or wailing or the silence of their breathing and these he knew lay suspended just as he was so suspended.

Into this Outer Dark, the doctors came, he perceiving them and their spider city and its threads moving through all points of time.

Past and future and present were here, the city acting like a spider web cast lengthwise invisibly against a windowpane so that one strand could be tomorrow and another yesterday with oneself able to walk between as easily as crossing a room.

They came to fetch him and he perceived them as they were.

He saw at first some creatures crawling across the ruins of a world. These creatures had been touched by flowers of fire and their flesh had slowly unravelled in its embrace.

Their minds grew as did their bodies as time passed, minds thrown into this Outer Dark corrupted by their time in the

cold.

Emerging from this, building this great edifice in the void the creatures were suddenly gifted power to change the fates of those like himself, stranded upon a linear line.

And he then too was about to be cast and changed but he saw that those who healed had no more understanding of what they did than a bacterium would understand the nature of a flower.

He grasped her then, the one he had grasped before, and twisting his role with her allowed her to see his life. To feel his life as if for the first time.

Reaching backward he found others, the walking wounded or those wounded brilliantly, and thrust them into the forms which came for him.

Suddenly he was on the road between the city of his home and the city of his enemies.

The documents were still held tightly in hand and he moved on, never again remembering what his face had been, or if he was not Illyrin or Illyria.

And there in the Alhyrmgorod the floral tribunes lay scattered, one and another and another each dreaming a dreamless sleep, becoming Elidryse or Cartier or Kingsley, each doctor now a patient tended by themselves.

And since the Alhyrmgorod was but an endless circle without beginning or end the cures continued again, the surgeons of the soul trying to lathe away the flaws they found, never seeing, not once, all those flaws they were their own.

Part II.

they were
harmed

ON GULIBAIRSEN

Each shape of their smiles, each
rounded shape of their tears.

Those who go to Gulibairsen are given two choices since there are only two continents on the planet. They may either go to Ulllxaon or they may go to Umarell.

Before this choice the nature of both landmasses is explained, native fauna and flora and native sentient species.

Despite this, or rather because of this, most make then the wrong choice.

Let me explain.

Ulllxaon resembles a lush and fertile valley interspersed with warm rivers the colour of wine. These lands are ruled over by the tlialon.

The tlialon appear as centaurs, all brightly coloured with shades of malachite mixtures of black and green. These shades of colour can determine the moods of some of them, though not all, and it is still challenging to know. Though some try.

But these centaurs are not the only inhabitants of Ulllxaon.

You can find women with serpentine hair in forests and glaistig satyrs roaming near rivers. Olbelis bird spirits glisten in the air and even wendigos have been heard, though never seen as yet.

Most of these creatures of myth use the kyat-katai as their mounts, great hawks plumed with the colours of thunder.

Umarell resembles a country composed only of white and black without any shade of grey and those upon it are so likewise.

Among the h'gralal all men are the colour of snow, all women the colour of midnight. Theirs are a virtan race, able to see several strands of the future and so in their society, it is common to act causing the least harm to others or themselves.

They will give freely to strangers, even their bodies. Words like “lust” or “envy” do not exist there among them, nor the word “weapon.”

The second are the tsuulba.

They appear as giant moths shepherding great bison the colour of snow who house their caterpillar young which will in time rupture forth from the bodies of the beasts.

For the tsuulba death is always adjacent to life.

They can only give birth in death, submersing themselves in dying pools, their final breath when their young are permitted to emerge.

And then there are the cialcircanians.

For them, conflict, emotion, fear and joy exist separate themselves. Ordered feelings appear about them as beasts of fire and chaotic moods are represented as black insects which follow where they walk.

These beasts of mind only return to their parent soul when the conflict is ended, joy ceasing or fear dying.

The cialcircanians appear as we do save that their hair appears as shards of flowers and their eyes are not the eyes of human beings.

So, which would you choose?

Most who think themselves artists, seers, and prophets always choose Ulllxaon while those who think themselves conquerors, masters and deceivers always choose Umarell.

But to the tlialon, glaistigs, serpent-haired women in their forests the colour of bright bones we are things of myth, our time among them spent slowly dissolving in their glances till we imagine there never was a time when medusas did not walk the Earth, when dragons did not scour our skies nor centaurs roar across our steppes.

And those who go to Umarell wishing to conquer it, to take hold of all those pacifistic beings content even to die if it will

mean new life takes hold, what becomes of them?

Among the h'gralal they slowly begin to see the future and their own pathetic demise unless they start to give, first their goods and then their bodies and finally their lives, or among the tsuulba they begin to inch closer to the dying pools, imagining the faces of children who will only come when they are cleanly swept from off the face of the world.

And among the cialcircanians?

If one remains among the cialcircanians long enough there comes the day their rage manifests as a bright black centipede crawling from their mouths or their envy slowly emerging as a black wasp from out their eyes.

It would be better otherwise of course, all the artists and the seers thrown amongst the seers of Umarell, all the conquerors trying to conquer the things of myth who still understand the nature of war or violence, but our choices often deceive us I have found.

It is the same as them given the choice to visit Earth when all upon Gulibairsen would rather stay where they are, believing their world is like all worlds, themselves like all other soul- wrought creatures of mind, imagining that there is no change among the living or the dead.

A jewel. A girl. A flower. The darkness.
Ruins. A grave. Tears. An eye. A spider's web.
Time. Time. Time . . .

I had been asked to visit the ruins of the mansion. It was late in the year with autumn fast approaching and the treeless valley was slowly decaying where I walked.

Ahead of me lay the gutted body of the mansion of Basil Kingsley which had long ago been burnt to ashes in an event known simply by those of the valley as the Dying Fire, (though why they called it this they could never say.)

I had been asked here by the villagers who never came near the blackened corpse of the once-white mansion, asked if I could explain what they had seen.

And what had they seen?

On certain nights when there was no moon the treeless valley known as Scal was occupied by some figures, or so said the villagers, whose heads brushed the sky, figures robed of light with crowns of horns upon their heads who sang with voices like demons and whose skeletal hands would often reach out, supposedly toward the living, imploring them of some horror which the peoples of the valley could not comprehend.

So, I was asked to come.

The mansion stood at the exact centre of the valley, itself the remnant caldera of what was an extinct volcano. It had, and here I had good authority, been an almost cubelike structure, utterly white in appearance with three great eyes for windows on the upper story and thick columns spreading to each side of the great doors like soldiers, seven to the left, seven to the right.

Now all that remained were the foundations and the subtle ammonite coil of metallic stairs, leading nowhere.

How might I begin?

If these were demons or spirits there were conceits I could employ but I had no such convictions yet. I had indeed encountered spirits and twice I had encountered demons in my work but this tasted differently to me.

There was a sadness embedded in the ground here which even after a century permeated everything and though ghosts are often supposedly born of great grief in my experience human souls endure only from rage. Sadness cools us even after passing and the descriptions of these horned peoples indicated neither human sadness nor unhuman fury.

There was grief here but nothing human had blossomed from this native soil.

I went about my work.

First stood where the gates stood. The threshold was always the point most strongly associated with death. One would be forgiven for thinking otherwise but in my experience spirits first emerge here at the point between and the point beyond than they ever do within our spheres of influence or without.

The blasted doors had long melted, steel frames twisted into a perverted parody of a man struggling to stand and I put my hands to this, feeling whatever I could.

Nothing.

Oh, I could sense the movement of where the living had been. Even got a flash of Basil's face, the angular jut of his jaw, his pale-blue eyes, and another flash, that of his daughter Seila whose photograph I had been shown days earlier.

I tried to brush the image of her from my mind. There was such a sadness behind those eyes even now I might have drowned in them staring too long and as I have said this human grief gave birth to no spirit. If it was her of course, somehow her, but the girl I saw was not human.

I brushed this too from my mind and entered the past.

There was no roof anymore but the foundations remained and I spent several hours walking their blunt geography. Though I couldn't reach the upper storey or descend into the cellar I didn't need to. Their dimensions had curled by now, flowing from the original positions to where I walked. As I moved the upper story, having already fallen a century ago, congealed about my steps, and the cellar below, having been incinerated partly into ash, had risen during the Dying Fire and so congealed itself as well.

Basil, I caught repeatedly, and Seila, and the jewel.

Photographs of this also I had seen, a pigeon egg-shaped stone composed of a pure scarlet so red and translucent as to betray itself as blood.

This had been worn by Seila many times and seen by the people of the valley when Basil and she had gone on walkabout, the jewel positioned perfectly on a chain hanging about her neck.

In all the images I had seen this jewel remained the only object I abhorred and even still I could not say why.

There were legends of course and myths surrounding the stone. Some said Satan had given it to Basil for forbidden knowledge and the Dying Fire was a devil's collecting. Others claimed the jewel was somehow Seila's child, preserved in some alchemical mystery from flesh to stone. And others simply called it evil without ever being able to fully say why.

I was a member of that third opinion.

Basil again, his angular face, his eyes, but his mouth here at the base of the ammonite coil how it seemed to snarl . . . this was new.

Seila, I caught as well, many times, often crying.

It was an open secret that Basil had his eye on his child, not in a fatherly way. And there remained the rumours of what had befallen the mother, ranging from her body buried in the flower beds to being put in the cellar to being cremated, itself somehow leading to the Dying Fire though she had disappeared

long years before the mansion had been gutted and destroyed.

Basil, not in a fatherly way.

The cellar rose occasionally from below, I watched the father and the daughter, and the bruises.

But this could not alone be the source of the creatures the villagers had seen.

What happened to the jewel?

I had asked this question repeatedly but received no satisfactory answer. It had been last seen about Seila's neck the last night of her life and the following day though her body like Basil's was discovered the jewel had been lost to time.

I finished my initial investigations and glanced at the sky to see it darkening. Tonight was a moonless night, so the great horned peoples were supposed to come who never moved beyond the boundary line of the caldera. And I was going to stay in the centre of this maelstrom and wait and see, doing what no man had done in a century.

Or, if any had none had lived to return to the villages from whence they came.

I returned to the threshold of the gate and sat upon the dead stone steps, sipping at some tea I had prepared and waited.

In another six hours, my investigations would conclude, one way or another.

It was nearest midnight when it began.

I had stayed awake the entire time, spreading my awareness out across the remnants of the ruins but found no further evidence to explain what the villagers had seen.

The light began at the furthest edge of the valley.

At first, I had not expected the light to come though the villagers had said it often began as so.

The light was golden, a soft peeling gold like the rays of a stranger sun, and this light was followed by another and another.

I counted fourteen such lights but there might have been many more.

And they began to change.

The light, the fire condensed and grew, solidifying to barely human shapes, and one or two grew so much as to indeed seem to touch their heads against the sky and horns grew from their heads, the great antler horns of certain old deities too often forgotten now.

And these beings of light were approaching me.

I could understand the villagers' fear. To watch such things
arise from the ether and simply *become,* to watch faces grow from fire and horns adorn their heads as crowns and robes of flowers blossom out along their splintered, splintering bodies . . . yes, I could understand the villagers' fears.

Though I could not share them.

I rose and went to meet these creatures who plagued the valley so.

One of them seemed to notice me as she came onward though the others were oblivious to my presence.

Were these demons or spirits I knew many means of defence against them, from salt to iron, but these were not demons nor spirits nor ghosts.

And I would not fear the unknown.

The one who watched me, who knew of my presence turned her unnatural face to me and bent down to stare more intently a time. Perspective had warped now, she existed both half a mile away and yet likewise inches from my face. I suppose this trick of the light terrified others who came.

I would not so bow to my fear though.

I had promised answers to the people of the valley here.

It is absurd to speak in moments like this. One does not say to a giant, "What are you doing in the valley, why are you

here?" If they know your native tongue it will simply make you seem small and pathetic to pretend you their equal and if they do not know your native tongue you are only making noise and noise can annoy even the living, let alone the dead.

All that you can do is stand and proceed forward and never *ever* retreat. This is not the time to move backward. The die is cast. If you are meant for oblivion nothing you do now will change that fact except facing the potential head-on.

So, I stopped and waited and moved not an inch behind.

The figures crept closer, their leader or who I took to be their leader continuing to eye me as one would eye a moth pinned under glass.

If she wished to terrify me, she would need another way.

When her steps were mere feet from my steps, when I looked up and saw the dimension of her swimming miles above, when I saw or pretended to see her horns mingling among the stars, she stopped then as did the others.

I was not certain if she was as solid as I was, if, should we pass closer each of us would fade into and out of the other, or if she would crush me neath her heel like the proverbial serpent.

I saw her turn to the others, to those of her left and right, and realized I had miscounted. There was indeed a fifteenth in their ranks but this final one stood only as high as I and seemed to hide behind the robes of her sister-mother.

For some reason, my eye turned most strongly to this one even with the great mother of them pressed so close beside and above me.

Then she stepped forward and I was enveloped in the folds of her luminous garments . . .

A jewel. A girl. A flower. The darkness.
Ruins. A grave. Tears. An eye. A spider's web.
Time. Time. Time . . .

This repeated in my mind again and again. The images of each drew back then, becoming the pigeon egg-shaped stone, becoming Seila, becoming a flower of fire, becoming an outer darkness I had seen before.

The outer darkness?

The Outer Dark.

There are alchemists and seers and mad prophets and demonologists who have written of the Outer Dark, of that place beyond, between, and in all my investigations have I seen glimpses of it only once and afterward spent a year recovering, unable to speak, barely able to remember the sound of my voice or the sound of my name.

But these beings had *drowned* in that Outer Dark . . .

Tears and an eye.

The sadness permeated me now washing over as a burial shroud. And the flower of fire continued and in the distance could I see it, blossoming and curling like a fungi miles above the ground.

The valley was gone now replaced by a wasteland seared by a terrible flame and I bent and watched small animals perishing, though some somehow survived.

Insects mostly, a few rats, though these were corrupted by the fire, limbs elongated, eyes twisted and broken wings of bone grew from their shoulder blades.

And then I saw her.

A small ragged girl was wandering the wastelands, her fingers elongated, her own eyes shimmering like silver in moonlight, and I felt it then. This was the last few moments of the last child's life. Nothing remained that was human here. All had perished in the fire.

But she was not human now, the fire having corrupted her as well. And in her death scream, I saw her pulled outward,

upward into the Outer Dark and beyond it, though long slivers of her remained still imprisoned there.

I saw this remnant of the girl flowing forward into the last moments of Seila's life, collapsing through that jewel whose origins even now I know not of, and out of her emergence came the Dying Fire.

Imagine the death scream of an entire world.

Imagine the last child of that world abused, and broken, knowing her people had betrayed themselves, had chosen oblivion and the fire, leaving the survivors to slowly follow. Now imagine being pulled not to heaven nor hell but through a Darkness beyond time or space, beyond memory or pain, beyond hope.

And now imagine you emerge into a new world without the destruction of your home and your first waking moment in that pristine new Eden is being raped by your father . . .

The Dying Fire was the last scream of a dying world condensed through the body of a little girl.

And these horned peoples are a further remnant, walking wounded of both girls' memories, fears, and desires still dreaming a dreamless sleep, except sometimes in the presence of beings like myself.

The threshold passed then, the figure moving beyond me now. It would cross the valley and then return and cross again, returning to true unbeing by the light of the sun's first light.

These splinters would remain, passing forward and back, the girl taken in the fire and the girl taken. But if these were but splinters where were the rest of them?

They could only be still in the Outer Dark.

And there was only one solution if that was the case.

The figures had passed the mansion by now so I had my chance. I went to the threshold of the door and began my invocations. Only here in all the valley were the walls thinnest

between the worlds and only here could I act even at the cost of my own life.

This was the only time I felt true fear.

One may wonder why I would risk my life, but consider. So far, these beings occupied only the valley, and the valley was only known to a few villagers, numbering no more than a thousand souls.

But should they be known to others who had no such fears as the villagers possessed, should some come attempting somehow to exploit them, to turn them into weapons. . . each of them possessed still the seed of that ancient fire the furnace of which had been enough to incinerate a sphere. And that fire had been merely a blunt beast while these were capable of thought, and malice.

And if they were connected still to the Outer Dark, if that barrier was opened and incapable of being closed then the stars across creation would darken, planets and even dimensions be consumed and devoured, and our souls turned to jagged shards and left suspended forever in an agony that would make us envy those in hell.

I had no choice but to act.

I waited until they came again then began the invocation I had promised myself never to utter again.

As she crossed through my body I opened the door and plunged lengthwise with her into a darkness more complete than night.

She fell. I fell.

I had no senses then, nor did she. There was only the passage of time. She, having already struggled through this panicked, having at least some experience better knew of it. But time was infinite here. We could be trapped forever, drowning in darkness.

I reached for her, knowing she was near, feeling without

senses the path her body had taken in plunging through the Outer Dark, and when I caught hold of her, feeling my sanity slowly ebb there blazed finally ahead of us what I had been expecting.

Her future self.

The Outer Dark existed beyond time but we as creatures of time were compelled to exist along a single linear line. The man I was existed before the man I am and the man I am existed after becoming the man I will be.

In the Outer Dark each moment a new branch is formed, a new being born from yourself, second to second, minute to minute, first two then four, doubling each second, yourself perceiving each branch even though you are without senses here.

Imagine feeling a trillion minds being born in the dark, second after second continuing, each yourself and not yourself, each screaming and each hearing the scream of all those before you, all those after you, and knowing it will never *ever* stop . . .

But I had no other choice.

She too was there, all the myriad strands of her who had remained in the Outer Dark, trillions upon trillions of such shards remaining, screaming, changing all the time.

I reached out then, invoking the Ilryaeib, the spider city that lay at the centre of time's web. I invoked this, whispering soundlessly the words to her who had existed here forever till the Outer Dark itself had been slowly drowned in her.

I invoked Ulruyaeib and Iscairyh Ilysuin, I invoked the spider city to pierce lengthwise a moment into the Outer Dark, and reaching limbs impervious to being felt I touched the strands of it, dragging her along with me, back into time.

All of her and all of me was pulled into the invisible city then and this invisible city jutted back the way we came, back into the threshold of the door of the ruined mansion, herself collapsing back into the body she had worn once when she had been alive.

The others departed, themselves collapsing slowly back

into the child leaving but the fifteenth to remain, taking slowly the features of Seila upon herself again.

The Outer Dark closed itself, or rather Iscairyh Ilysuin closed it, I saw once the form of it in the darkness, praying never to see the form again.

I spoke my name. Realized I could say my name. I felt all those before but I still retained my sense of self. To this day I do not know why unless I was shielded by her or Iscairyh Ilysuin or Ulruyaeib but if it was them who spared me, I dread the debt I must someday pay.

The girl was so small and she wore a dress of silver, Seila who came before me, and in her palm the jewel, which later I would name.

The girl whose name was Elidryse had been drawn to Seila through the jewel and for the last century, they had existed in the time of not remembering.

Tears and an eye.

Later, much later after we had left, after I had gone in search of Seila's mother finding her place of burial near the threshold and having her properly buried beside her daughter's grave, after I had taken the girls to the village where I contacted several souls acquainted of such darkness as myself, after the mansion had been utterly destroyed and the last traces of it driven from the Earth I brought the girls to some of those I knew.

I understand they are being treated for the abuses they've endured but being officially dead new identities were needed for both of them.

Finally, I made my last report.

I wrote of my experience in the valley of Scal and of that other planet and of the flower of fire which I saw. Elidryse called her home Tscalne and the city of her home which had existed before the fire she called the Cahirgorod, the "Paradise of Man."

There were many details of her home she recalled and

being the last witness to it those details are being carefully preserved.

Of special note is a term she repeated again and again.

The floral tribune.

It is, according to her, the name of a being of indescribable power who with a mere gesture could make and unmake a world, a being who dwells in the Aylhormgorod, the "Paradise of Flowers," a city of time residing upon the shores of the Aulxeireos.

If this floral tribune is like Iscairyh Ilysuin or Ulruyaeib it is important we know as much as we can. Although. Although I have a theory regarding the floral tribune.

It may be Elidryse herself seeing what she would become had all of her emerged from the Outer Dark. I have no reason to suspect such a thing but we know that rage so often can produce a spirit and what I saw in the valley of Scal was not rage but grief and loss. Though I have often found when grief ends, when loss ends there remains a force capable of turning bones and skin to gardens likened onto flowers. I pray that I am wrong in my opinion though.

The injustices done to Elidryse and Seila had blackened an entire valley and turned them into creatures as unlike men as men are unlike a pestilence. Imagine if instead she had come fully formed divorced of all things human, an angel of purest light given the powers of a god.

To seek revenge is a human thing I can understand.

But if a small scared child had suddenly emerged seeing the grief and misery of man even here without even the capacity to understand human thought or feeling, what might she have done?

She might have tried to help us all. And if she had then nothing human of us would have remained.

It would have been the same as suddenly turning a virus

into a man, uplifting us out of our former shapes . . . I pray that I am wrong. I pray the floral tribune is like Ulruyaeib or Iscairyh Ilysuin, utterly indifferent to our sufferings and so indifferent to our salvations.

Of the jewel which may well have been the cause of all this, it remains in a vault whose location even I do not know. But I gave a name to it as we are required to give a name to all such things.

I have called it the *Hunter of the Hidden Mind*. I do not know where came the name from unless perhaps I heard it in the Outer Dark uttered by myself some days in my future or uttered by myself in my past which I have somehow forgotten.

It is a trait the blessed sometimes possess, the ability to forget.

Part III.

they meant harm

Story One
Aulrenic's Story

Aulrenic had reached the plains of Melgwann by morning.

He had with him a rifle and a plan.

He was going to conquer all the dominion of the h'gralal and afterward be counted a happy man.

He crossed the fields the colour of snow and ash and was greeted by a woman likewise the colour of ash.

He pointed his rifle and told her he was her king.

She pointed to the city beyond and told him his throne was there if he were willing.

He was willing.

They crowned him without concern and with his rifle declared they would bow and serve him.

They did, perceiving all the strands ahead, all the myriad ways tomorrow would turn.

He demanded a palace be built but they told him it had already been built a year before. For him of course.

He occupied each of the thousand rooms and orgies were held there, he at the centre of them.

They obeyed seemingly without concern.

It was in the following season when the white fields and the black began to decay that he first saw a second ahead. He was standing upon the dais at the heart of his new palace and then he was suddenly standing inches to the left and followed this path to where his senses led him.

He asked one of his attendants what had happened but she just smiled, she who he had met the season before there upon the road leading to the city he would own.

Whose name he never asked for.

But now, and here he was caught suddenly by the terror of

it, he saw himself asking her name, she answering it, and so he knew what she was called.

She was called Xyenixa.

This was the first time he said her name, and she answered there in the shadows by the wall, the black smile of her face suddenly a new continent he had never sought before.

By the end of that day, he was seeing into the next season and all their myriad strands now. He saw himself upon the fields of Melgwann torn to pieces by his former subjects or dying and drowning in the marble womb where he bathed alone, the great moon doors sealed against the possibility of an assassin, little knowing till then the door itself an assassin of a kind.

All these strands coalesced when he tried no longer to live like a man but like them.

During the days which followed he gradually put the palace away, took up residence in a small hovel at the edge of the city, and then began carving statues like those he had seen before, never mentioning or considering it as anything but primitive art.

These statues were the days he longed for most, actions taken in future events he most desired.

He saw himself written in wood or stone kneeling at the city's edge or quiet in his meditation or surrounded in orgies, himself no longer their master but neither their slave, aging and aging, the rifle remaining in the palace till the last statue was of himself in the snow-black clay.

Buried as all h'gralal were, without marker to their name. . .

Kursamma had reached the plains of Melgwann by morning.

She had with her a rifle and a plan.

She was going to conquer all the dominion of the h'gralal and afterward be counted a happy woman.

She crossed the fields the colour of snow and ash and was greeted by a man likewise the colour of snow.

She pointed her rifle and told him she was his queen.

He pointed to the city beyond and told her the throne was there if she were willing.

She was willing.

Also, did he mention a palace of a thousand rooms, sunlit windows, and the great galleries which housed the faces of all such conquerors and kings and queens.

When was the palace built, she asked.

The palace, he replied, had always been.

Story Two
Mervenne's Story

Mervenne had heard stories of the cialcircanians and the tsuulba and how it was that men and women who went there to conquer never did.

But Mervenne was not like those other men and women, being, what was whispered in polite company, a psychopath.

Many such as her were sent to Umarell and though none else returned she was exceptional and beautiful and wise beyond all measure and no world was ripe to hold her.

So, she went.

She was greeted at the plains of Melgwann by a moth tending her herds of bison which roiled across the land. The beasts were large and hoary-headed and stank of an exotic dung and Mervenne went and without a word sliced the moth lengthwise along the body.

The snow-coloured elongated body of the girl poured forth her blood the colour of burnt liquor and the bison howled and Mervenne went to them to slaughter them as well.

The chance was taken from her when she was covered in a small sea of wasps.

Turning she beheld the cialcircanian who was approaching.

She brushed away the wasp sea and squared up to face the challenger.

His hair was that of flowers bristling along his scalp and he eyed the woman who regarded herself so beautiful in all respects.

He spoke not a word.

Instead, the sea of wasps returned to him and he drew forth a creature made of fire.

But Mervenne too had studied the nature of this world.

She drew forth a creature of fire herself, a great jaguar that had never before stalked this native soil.

His beast she had no word for having never studied their language or their thoughts, knowing only the surface and so only the surface she would conquer.

The two beasts stalked each other and then his struck.

But she was an old hand at violence and he was not.

His beast bled and with it so did his heart. If she could kill the beast she'd kill the man, she reasoned. Strange that the seas of wasps were not released to continue their assault upon her.

And all the time the bison and their blunted horns, their devil's feet shook and shocked themselves along the countryside heading away from the carnage as the infants in their bodies cooled like glass and came forth for their mother was dead, her infants now coming to be.

Mervenne with a final thrust of a taloned fist drew back the beast and so fell the man.

But killing one man was not the taking of a world but whole armies had come to Umarell and never returned. Though they were not her, and if it was her desire she would take all the world even if it meant taking a man a day or twice a day till the end of life or when Gulibairsen bowed to her.

The man fell and in her she felt the pleasure of the act.

Then and only then uprose the seas of black wasps again which swarmed to her as the beast of fire the man created crept to her, putting its muzzle in her hand.

They were her creatures now she reasoned and with them the beginnings of her army.

Then she felt it, finally and for the first time.

She felt fear.

The wasps were nothing but his fears, of course, his anger, and his rages which she had no true reference for. And the beast of fire he had conjured was his empathy which was now slowly

dissolving into her skin.

And they plunged through her eyes painlessly making of her their nest.

The beast of fire whose face now seemed her own had already fled into the elder space of her inner body and if she had no soul before one was thrust against her now.

Later that day the man returned to his village.

He spoke to those he knew and they to him, went to the small study of his library, and drew down a book of crystal which he read.

To the others of his village, it seemed no change had come upon him, but if a child of Earth had been here, they might have argued he was no man of the cialcircanian race at all but a human woman.

But if told this the others of the village would find the thought absurd. For following in his wake were swarms of small fears which they recognized as his own and the great hunger of his compassion striding before him always, shaped as a creature which they called a formorai.

Of this creature no child of Earth had ever seen before, could not describe clearly in fact, for it shifted form together and apart and together, without ever being born.

Story Three
Jodeleyne's Story

Jodeleyne had taken her canvas and was already turning the forests into something she could take home with her.

She had already made various small worlds which remained in their proper places in the galleries of her city. It was crucial to make that point, things existing in their proper places seen only through the proper perceptions of her mind. In the gallery of Ksulunar she had placed *The Romance of Silence* and *The Romance of the White Snake*, taking both from different terrestrial legends.

In one a girl had been raised a boy and become a knight, her true gender not even revealed to her.

In the second a white snake had taken on the features of a woman and fell in love with a man who ultimately promised her a soul.

The first painting featured Silence astride her horse, great forests in the distance, and a castle as well, its spires shutting out fragments of light from an unseen, perhaps nonexistent sun.

Her lance was in her left hand which glinted like silver and the horse was panting as the armour upon her body smoked small rivulets of steam into the air.

And the white snake and her green serpentine sister were upon a bridge which curled over a river the colour of black wine, a man there likewise dressed in robes of orange, the sun just cracking against the top of the canvas turning the blue ocean sky a few shades of snow white.

Now Jodeleyne was on Gulibairsen to add another myth to her menagerie.

She'd already seen the glaistigs who resided by the rivers. Their bodies were like those of the ancient satyrs, devil-footed with the upper bodies of men and women and the small

earth-brown antlers of deer striding upon their heads like the crowns of crucified criminals. But these were not the proper models for her own small private universe.

There was mention of a medusa here, a girl of serpent's hair, and this hair it was said acted independently, sinuously coiling and curling, and each sparkling topaz eye could ensnare a soul beneath its gaze.

As for the girl accounts of her differed, some claiming there was no girl, rather the serpents were the only living thing and the body beneath them but the marionette they operated as one would an obedient machine.

It did not matter to the artist what she was only that was she captured by the artist's hand properly.

It was by midday that Jodeleyne saw the object of her desire coming between the trees.

At first, she wasn't certain of what she saw. Serpents certainly, roiling forms of something moving among ash-grey trees, grey serpentine scales rising midway in the air, where, if a girl were there, her hair would be.

Then the body formed afterward, head first, then her shoulders, long greying arms emerging and descending into what seemed to be taloned hands.

She never questioned the colour though, why serpent and tree would be shaded the same, way the grass here was itself always ashen grey, always the perfect identical shade as if the product of a single eye incapable of seeing elsewise.

Then the legs slowly uncoiled from the form, preceded by her breasts, by the thin shape of her stomach, her waist, leading down perhaps to the same devil's feet of the glaistigs though the artist wasn't certain of this.

Then was Jodeleyne caught neath the medusa's eye.

Her hands continued their labour capturing on the canvas every sinew of her thighs, every discolouration of a nail across her

finger as the medusa stopped and began to write into the barks of certain trees.

The process continued for well over an hour until finished Jodeleyne's hand paused as did the medusa's.

Then as if on some subconscious cue the two walked toward the other, Jodeleyne noticing more clearly the yellow of the serpent's eyes, a small archipelago of gold in seas of grey while the medusa noted the small features of the strange creature come into her forest, the dark voids across her face obscuring it, having no understanding of hair nor the garments which she wore.

Jodeleyne reached where the medusa stood and likewise, the medusa stood where Jodeleyne had.

She regarded the canvas coldly a moment then clarity took hold. This was how the stranger saw her. There was a small communion in the act of being seen which the medusa considered an even trade in that she had made a canvas of the trees and a portrait of her own.

Jodeleyne was before this portrait now.

It was unclear at first, but as she moved from tree to tree piecing them together the image crept out clear of the clearing beyond and of herself painting there.

For some long minutes the two artists studied the other's work then the medusa returned the way she came. As she did so Jodeleyne subtly felt the trees about begin to bend as if in watching her. She began, for but a moment mind, to consider the medusa nothing but the merest tendril of the beast below, the entire forest itself nothing but the serpentine hair of something stalking below her feet of which the serpents above were unaware.

At that moment she was no longer observing the image but herself a piece caught upon it, beneath it, within it, a mere aspect of the much larger universe of which she was intimately

unaware.

She stared at this paradox of herself being seen and seeing as the medusa wandered on a time, slowly losing one serpentine thread and then another, gradually bathing by nearby rivers as glaistigs watched her bathe.

Each serpentine thread returned to the forest and embedded itself among Jodeleyne's hair till she was bald otherwise and then forgot ever being Jodeleyne, considering now the forest to be her home.

And if she went to view the canvas beyond, she would only see her reflection then, wondering who it was who had painted it, and why.

Story Four
His Story

He came to Ulllxaon because he was told all things there were creatures of myth.

He went first among the glaistigs who would carve into the fields, making great mosaics of epics that could only be seen from above.

He wandered in the forests of the medusas and watched as the great centaurs who called themselves the tlialon would make malachite tattoos of their bodies along the far hills, great banners and rolling thunders of their hooves making the far valley appear as the rippling bodies of certain dragons.

He went in search of something little knowing what it was.

It was in the farthest north that he finally found his seeking.

Always before her face, he saw, even in the faces of the medusas, always also knowing she was dead.

But in the cold and the white snow and the steppes there came a voice, soft and sinister and he to this went, dripping his grief behind him along the stones like banners or bayonets.

Her face was of the woman he had loved, always loved, even when she no longer loved him. But he kept her in his heart, even now, even still, and knew exactly where she was.

Where he had buried her.

But knowing where she was the further away, he went from her and whenever her face he saw he would go further on, herself following even while she remained behind.

There is a logic to murders and to murderers which all others do not find.

In the cold, it was beginning to darken and the talons of the far fair mountains glistened like her smile and the voice

continued, soft and sinister, he heard it, imagining it her own.

But it was a wendigo stalking by.

Out of the crevices of the earth before him, it arose, gaunt and grey with eyes the colour of winter glinting in the sun. He regarded it then with the cool cunning a serpent feels in watching a rabbit passing by before twisting his role from predator to prey.

The wendigo stared at him, having done so since he first arrived, feeling him as a sliver of the cold passing from the summer below to his native home and soil.

Talons stretched forth, the man unrecoiling as he put forth his hand touching the shallow skin of the demon's face.

Then crept others, all of them using her voice, he expectant toward his transformation, his apotheosis.

They came to him then, adding small pieces of winter into him until his skin greyed the way a corpse does in snow.

Afterward, he went willingly with them, her voice still upon each of their lips, her voice now achingly stretching along his mouth. And with her utterly within him and him now a creature as unto the cold he departed from himself utterly now, departed bones and body, departed mind and soul, his spirit now wandering south for other places yet to go, his spirit wandering south for other spirits like his own to know and find . . .

And dissolve beside.

Part IV.

after harm

L'AULRIQUE

She is made of ravens only,
her hands are feathers of coarsely
blackened wings brokenly
as her voice is,
her body composed
of blackened bodies thru. The
fact of form betrays herself, for

though she seems our
shape he knows,
she knows, her victims know she goes
to carry them to farther shore. I suppose
that as I see her too I am for
the farther shore.

Her name, lonely
name of hers is L'aulrique,
suppose it hardly
matters now though. Before
I go tend the fields a time,
implore you of that, to tend my
burial ground once more.

Seiladryse Rhonne

THE MOON OF DHALRYAS

On the moon of Dhalryas
are mirror oceans and as
you go, in glancing down
you see yourself now thrown
to your true shape, whether
angel, demon, spirit or ogre,
but in passing thru to the other
shore all you were is left behind,
for her.

Jodeleyne Rhonne

ILESWANDRA

At Ileswandra I told her my
love outspread by each word said.

We waited longer there by waters
at Ileswandra neath summer sky
colour of my fear and dread,

as you fell,
I with you,
to hell.

John Cartier

THE MOON HAS A HIDDEN FACE

The moon has a hidden face
I think.
The moon that we see
always hides a second self
and the more we drink
its beauty the further
hidden it becomes
until that hidden face finally
resides inside ourselves
and the sums of our worst sins
take on new skin,
become a second face,
imposing on our own.

Basil Kingsley